The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System

3

REN ZHA FANPAI
ZIJIU XITONG

MO XIANG TONG XIU

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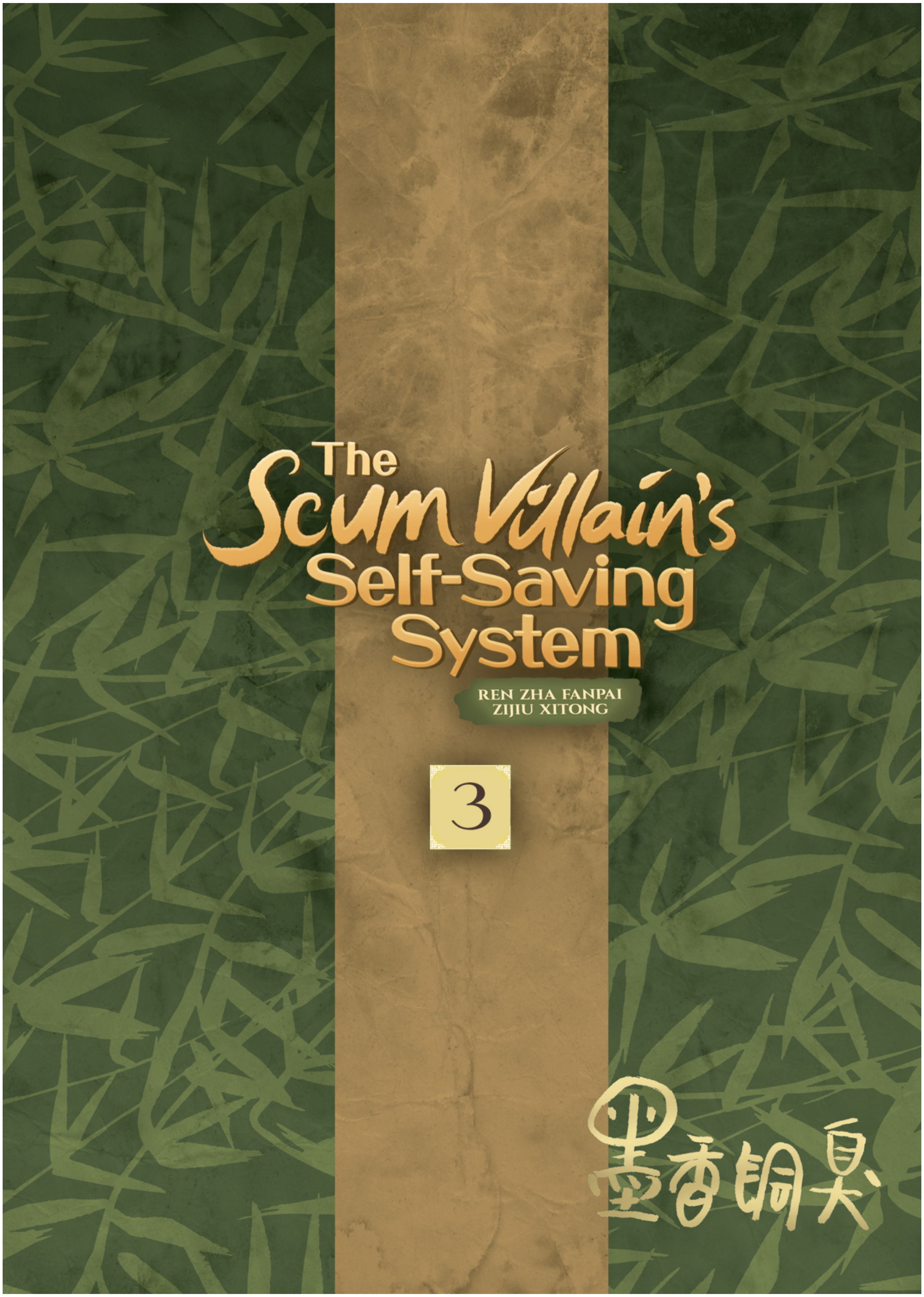

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REN ZHA FANPAI ZIJIU XITONG VOL. 3

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Chapter 14:
House Arrest

A WIDE STONE CORRIDOR connected the rift between the two realms. Pair after pair of torches stretched endlessly into the distance, and the deepest reaches were cast in a forbidding gloom. The style of the murals lining both sides of the corridor and the ominous atmosphere made clear that this was Luo Binghe's headquarters in the Demon Realm.

After the rift closed, Luo Binghe slowly released his iron grip on Shen Qingqiu. Shen Qingqiu stood straight and dusted off his sleeves, not saying a word.

Neither of them had anything to say. Keeping their eyes straight ahead, they walked, one in front and one behind. Their footsteps made not a breath of sound, and the atmosphere was stiff and cold.

The forks in the corridor of the underground palace slowed Luo Binghe by not even a hairsbreadth. After a path full of twists and turns, the scene suddenly opened before their eyes. Architecture in the Demon Realm was mostly entrenched underground in excavated subterranean caves, never exposed to the sun, moon, or stars. This area, however, broke through the ground overhead, allowing sunlight to pierce the interior and lend it quite a bit of life.

Upon crossing through the door, Shen Qingqiu found the furnishings and arrangement of the room quite familiar. In fact, it was very similar to the Bamboo House on Qing Jing Peak.

Shen Qingqiu was filled with an inexplicable fury.

He really wanted to ask Luo Binghe, "Is there any meaning to this?"

Arranging the scene and props like we're acting on stage, dumping me in this little pen, pretending like nothing ever happened—do you want to continue that little domestic play from your dream realm of a loving master and disciple?

Acting pathetic and pitiful one moment to make Shen Qingqiu overflow with sympathy, then slapping him across the face and telling him it was all an act in the next. What was real? What was fake? He wasn't so perceptive that he could see through to Luo Binghe's real thoughts, how much was honest and how much insincere.

While Shen Qingqiu brooded to himself, Luo Binghe walked a step closer to him.

A few days earlier, Shen Qingqiu couldn't have gotten away from Luo Binghe fast enough, retreating three steps for every one he took. Now he didn't want to do that sort of thing anymore. Retreating would make him look too much like a respectable woman kidnapped by a ruffian—too much like affected bashfulness. Even as a dragon swimming in shallow waters or a tiger dropped onto the plains (if he were so shameless as to describe himself as such), he could still scrounge up his last iota of elegant and prudent poser skills. So, he wouldn't sink to such a thoroughly unsightly state.

But he was inevitably tense, his heart stretched as taut as a bowstring. His fingers curled, and his eyelid twitched.

And how perceptive Luo Binghe was. He took another step forward. "Shizun, what do you think I'm going to do to you?"

"I cannot guess," Shen Qingqiu said sincerely.

He would never dare randomly guess at Luo Binghe's intentions ever again. As reality proved over and over, he was light-years off the mark every time!

Luo Binghe reached out his right hand. Shen Qingqiu didn't move an inch, but his gaze was glued to those fingertips, following their whole trajectory.

That hand was slender and unadorned. It didn't look like the hand of a young lord of the demon race who had already taken countless lives, but rather one whose master had been born to pluck strings, his hand to burn incense and bathe in snow. It slid faintly over Shen Qingqiu's cheek, a barely discernible brush against his skin.

Then it landed on his throat.

Shen Qingqiu didn't know whether he was mistaken, but this hand seemed to press exactly against one of the major arteries of his neck. His throat bobbed imperceptibly.

But Luo Binghe pulled his hand away. The next time he opened his mouth, it was impossible to read his emotions. “My blood no longer responds to my beckoning.”

So when he had touched Shen Qingqiu’s skin just now, it had been to probe the suppressed heavenly demon’s blood in Shen Qingqiu’s body.

“It looks like in these short few days, Shizun had a fortuitous encounter,” said Luo Binghe.

“So, what are you going to do?” Shen Qingqiu asked. “Make me drink it again?”

“You’ll run if you drink it, you’ll run if you don’t; it’s the same either way. I’d prefer not to give Shizun another reason to loathe me.”

In front of others, he had left not a bit of face for Shen Qingqiu, but in private, he suddenly became polite and courteous. There was no concise way to express what Shen Qingqiu felt about this.

“Shizun, please stay here for the time being. If you are willing, you may go wherever you wish within the underground palace,” Luo Binghe continued. “I have left some people outside, but they will not enter this room. If you want for anything, simply summon them.”

“How considerate,” said Shen Qingqiu.

Luo Binghe fixed his gaze on him for a time, then said, “Is there anything you want?”

Shen Qingqiu said, “I can ask for anything?”

Luo Binghe nodded.

In a sudden spate of malice, Shen Qingqiu bluntly said, “Then I ask to see you as little as possible. It will be best if I never see you at all.”

Luo Binghe looked as if he had never expected Shen Qingqiu to make this sort of request. His face paled.

At the sight of this, Shen Qingqiu felt a flash of schadenfreude, but at the same time, he also felt a stab of pain, like he had been pricked by a needle. Perhaps it was because, in the past, he had never said anything so scathing and vicious to anyone.

The color took a long time to return to Luo Binghe's face. "Shizun once asked me if I wanted to become strong."

"When I asked you that question, I believe I also told you that the purpose of becoming strong is to protect, not to plunder and slaughter," said Shen Qingqiu.

"No," Luo Binghe said in a dull tone. "You had it wrong. Not everything Shizun taught was correct. Only after becoming the strongest can one keep the people they want to have securely in their palms. I finally understand. Waiting for Shizun to come himself won't do." He clenched his fist, forcefully twisting a vicious smile onto his face. "So, now that I've caught you, Shizun had better not think of escaping ever again!"

After this devil incarnate exited the scene, Shen Qingqiu pinged the System. "Are you there, 2.0?"

The System provides comprehensive 24-hour support and a user-friendly online service.

"Uh, comprehensive is enough, forget about the user-friendly. What are my current point values?"

B-Points: 1,330. Successfully removed "Laden with Landmines" tag from Proud Immortal Demon Way; unlocked achievement "Rather a Lot of Things to Roast." Keep up the good work! We look forward to your next mystery achievement unlock. Satisfaction points: 3,840. Anger points: 1,500. Heartbreak points: 4,500. Continued efforts required.

Very good. Through his great effort (grave-digging), this stupidly cliché stallion novel had finally seen some improvement in terms of B-Points. Though "Rather a Lot of Things to Roast" wasn't a favorable evaluation, it was certainly a few ticks above "Laden with Landmines," right? Also, the anger points weren't the heaven-defying value he had feared, though the heartbreak points were high enough that he felt like he had been pricked by another needle.

Averting his gaze, Shen Qingqiu said, "With so many satisfaction points, can I exchange them for something?"

You can exchange them for a System feature upgrade.

Shen Qingqiu's mood improved a bit. "Okay. Do the upgrade."

With a ringing notification sound, the System bashfully began to download the upgrade package.

Shen Qingqiu had a thought, then asked, “Right, what’s the name of this feature upgrade again?”

Small Scenario Pusher: Luxury Edition.

Shen Qingqiu decisively jabbed at the cancel button on the download window.

Crap, it’s already downloaded, and it fucking cost three thousand satisfaction points. I’m leaving a bad review!

As he aggrievedly spammed the System with a laundry list of complaints, Shen Qingqiu began his life under house arrest.

Luo Binghe was busy uniting the northern border demons in Mobei-Jun’s territory, and Sha Hualing seemed to have officially initiated her grand undertaking to backstab her dad—literally. In short, in the near future, Luo Binghe had plenty of enemies to obliterate and allies to rope in. He was likely busy with work that he couldn’t extricate himself from, and for that reason, he never showed his face again.

Or maybe it was because that first day, a couple of harsh words from Shen Qingqiu had shattered his glass heart upon the ground, and he was too afraid to show his face. Shen Qingqiu tried his best to tear his thoughts away from the latter possibility.

Either way, if Luo Binghe continued to leave him alone, wasn’t this the exact “days spent idling away to a ripe old age” lifestyle he had been pursuing this whole time?

Furthermore, Luo Binghe didn’t act like the characters in the strange novels that Shen Qingqiu’s younger sister had liked to read in his previous life. He didn’t shackle Shen Qingqiu to the bed with iron chains, blindfolded and gagged, or strip him naked and beat him or anything.

You’ll never be unhappy once you learn to be satisfied with what you have. Might as well just go with the flow.

Bullshit!

If Shen Qingqiu could honestly comfort himself that way, he’d have shit for brains. He didn’t have Stockholm syndrome—he wouldn’t be falling over himself with gratitude at the slightest hint of good treatment. A fortunate lifestyle needs to be built by one's own hands, not acquired by way of charity, understand?!

After failing to brainwash himself, Shen Qingqiu's fingers tightened, and a page of the book he was reading tore in his hands. At the same time, a louder sound of cracking bamboo came from outside the window. He lifted the curtain and saw a group of demon servants hurrying about. Poking his head outside, he asked, "What are you doing?"

"Master Shen, what brings you outside?" The servant had an extremely enthusiastic and deferential attitude, completely unlike someone speaking to a person under house arrest. He smiled and said, "We're planting bamboo over here."

Shen Qingqiu started. "Bamboo?"

"Mm-hmm. You should recognize this Human Realm plant. It's hard to plant here in the Demon Realm and won't grow properly, but our lord is determined to cultivate it here, so everyone just has to find a way."

Observing the servant's strength and the way he moved, Shen Qingqiu knew he was definitely no ordinary manual laborer. The demons Luo Binghe had recruited from the major demon tribes's fighting forces were doubtless their cream of the crop. To make these martial experts do odd jobs was categorically a waste of resources.

And that wasn't even the end of it. For the first two days, Shen Qingqiu had neither the mood nor appetite, but on the third day he lost interest in inedia and gave a few reserved instructions to (i.e., flirted with) the pretty, pale, and busty demon maid, calling for a meal to be delivered. Before he had taken even two bites, he lost the will to continue.

The maid tilted her head. "What is it, Master Shen?" she asked with a grin. "Is the flavor not good?"

The flavor was good. Very good. It was precisely because it was *too* good, an *extremely familiar* kind of good—one that Shen Qingqiu hadn't tasted for years—that he could not continue.

He put down his chopsticks and asked, "Did you make this, miss?"

The maid giggled. “How could that be? I only know how to kill and eat the meat fresh, or wait for it to rot before eating. I don’t know these human recipes, with all their fire and rice, oil and salt. Far too annoying.”

Fuck. So this beautiful, clear-voiced demon, with her sweet orchid-scented breath, was a lover of rotten-flesh. Shen Qingqiu could just tell that making this girl clean tables and sweep the floor every day was a profound debasement. He figured that her abilities were probably more suited to slaying her enemies with a set of broadaxes as opposed to chopping melons and vegetables, and it was very likely she had once held that exact job.

“Then who made it?” Shen Qingqiu asked flatly.

“Ayo, this I dare not say,” said the maid. “My lord would definitely kill me if I did.”

“Dare not say”? Would he be somehow unable to taste the truth as long as she didn’t?

Shen Qingqiu put down the chopsticks, then picked them up again. What was that saying again? “The hand that has received is hesitant, the mouth that has been fed is weak.” Shen Qingqiu fretted hard over whether, after finishing this meal, he could still self-righteously express dissatisfaction with Luo Binghe. But in the end, the cook was too familiar with Shen Qingqiu’s tastes and eating habits, and in the midst of his fretting, he unknowingly managed to clean his plate…

The maid cleared the dishes and left with swaying hips, covering a smirk with her hand.

Not long after she left, the curtain lifted and a person wobbled their way in. At the sight of this face, a vicious feeling sprang from Shen Qingqiu’s gut. Greeting him with a spiritual blast, he yelled, “Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky, fuck your—”

Shang Qinghua frantically raised his hands to block, raising a still-sheathed sword between them to absorb the attack. “Hey, hey, hey! Don’t! A thousand times don’t! Good Master Shen, you can’t just fuck around with whoever you please now. If you fucked around with me—well, it wouldn’t end well for me, but don’t think that guy would let you off easy either.”

“You sold me out!” Shen Qingqiu roared. “What about our friendship? What of being comrades from the same hometown?!”

“Since when did we have a friendship! Unless it was a love-hate relationship all along?” Shang Qinghua retorted. “Ah, stop that, it hurts! What else could I have done but sell you out? That’s Esteemed Master Luo, okay? Even if I hadn’t sold you out, he was about to guess anyway. Why would I take an extra beating for no reason? That would have been pointless, so I chose to confess for a lenient sentence.”

Shen Qingqiu was shocked by the matter-of-fact shamelessness of this reply. In this moment of inattention, Shang Qinghua strode over and sat down at the table with a lift of his hem. He slapped the sword he was holding down onto the table. “Let’s not talk about this anymore. I was ordered to deliver something to you.”

Once Shen Qingqiu got a better look at that sword, his hand was already reaching out to touch it. It was the very sword that had been shattered to pieces by his collapsing spiritual energy when he had self-detonated: the misfortunate Xiu Ya.

Shen Qingqiu retained an emotional attachment to Xiu Ya, and as soon as he grasped his former sword in hand, he had no more attention to devote to beating up Shang Qinghua. Drawing the blade from its sheath, it was as pure white and snow bright as it had ever been, slender and elegant. Its broken pieces had been seamlessly reconnected, and it overflowed with spiritual energy, with not a hairline fracture to be seen.

To the side, Shang Qinghua let out a squirrelly laugh and rubbed his hands, clicking his tongue, “Aiyah, I really, really never thought…that the story line would warp to this point. Remarkable, truly remarkable.”

“The stallion novel protagonist you wrote turned gay,” said Shen Qingqiu. “Shouldn’t you be angry?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shang Qinghua said sincerely. “Either way, the one he’s got his eye on isn’t me.”

Shen Qingqiu gave him a cordial middle finger, then looked back down to polish his sword.

Shang Qinghua gave him a thumbs-up. “Really, you don’t need to be so pessimistic. You have good prospects for the future, quite good prospects. Those golden thighs, they’re thick and sturdy, very reliable!”

“Take your fucking golden thighs,” said Shen Qingqiu. “At least those are just thighs. Where have I ended up? Between the thighs!”

“Between the thighs is even better, ah. A man’s most important object is between the thighs.”

If not for the fact that Xiu Ya had only just returned to Shen Qingqiu’s hands and he couldn’t bear to use it for filthy things, he really had the mind to slice off a chunk of that object between Shang Qinghua’s thighs. Not in the mood for this buffoonery, his face grew serious again. “Since you confessed for leniency, I’ll ask you: Did you ever establish any settings for the character of Tianlang-Jun?”

“Why are you asking about Bing-ge’s dad?” Shang Qinghua replied.

“No real reason. I just thought it strange how you didn’t write a whole thesis on the protagonist’s father. I know for a fact that you can crank out a million words by adding another wife; you could definitely serialize for three more years by adding a father.”

Shang Qinghua’s ears pricked up. “You really have an eye for this—undeniably a faithful reader of mine. I can tell you that originally, I was writing from a grand outline where Bing-ge’s dad was the final boss. But as I wrote, my computer died, I lost my outline, and I forgot a ton of the details. And back then, everyone in the comments section was saying they wanted to see the other plotline, right? The one where Bing-ge bravely conquered a hundred flowers, you understand. A whole hundred holy flower spirits who had from their birth never laid eyes on a man, and all of them virgins. Cucumber-bro, how I suffered while writing the chapter of the hundred flower buds’ first mass-blooming! And still you roast me…”

Shen Qingqiu responded with silence. At long last, he knew where all of those plot holes had come from. “So you went to write the harem subplot and decided to leave the more serious plotline of Bing-ge’s dad full of holes?”

“Actually, leaving it full of holes was no big deal, right? As long as the readers were satisfied,” said Shang Qinghua. “All the maidens who should have been bedded were bedded, and all the cannon fodder who should have been killed were killed. Pursuing another plotline that everyone might not be interested in would have been grueling and thankless. I needed to make a living; if the subscribers jumped ship, I wouldn't be able to feed myself, Cucumber-bro. Net writers really don't have it easy."

Except Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky had had too much fun cutting down those outlines, and the System's strict sense of responsibility was making Shen Qingqiu fill all the holes Shang Qinghua had dug while abandoning his artistic principles!

"In fact, I was also forced against my will," Shang Qinghua continued. "In my original outline, Tianlang-Jun had purer blood than Bing-ge, his martial power was stronger, he'd earned his fame earlier—he was just more badass all around. A proud and carefree wanderer of the three realms, standing far above the common sort or whatever, and he even had a deeply moving tragic backstory. Very Gary Stu, right? What if the readers thought he was stealing Bing-ge's spotlight and started protesting? What would I do then? You know Bing-ge's fans are very vicious—vicious when fighting, and also vicious when giving tips."

Shen Qingqiu facepalmed. Hearing this confession from "Great Master" Airplane, he was starting to worry. If Tianlang-Jun really had been released, would Luo Binghe even be able to defeat him?

But looking at it from another angle, maybe it would be possible to use the father to curb the son? Shen Qingqiu immediately snuffed out that dangerous line of thought. When it came to an opponent you knew nothing about, where even their moral alignment was in question, stupidly attempting to use them could result in you dying without even knowing the reason why.

So, the conclusion was still rock-solid, unchanging even after ten thousand years: "Great Master" Airplane Flying Towards the Sky truly was the genius of a generation, a man of unparalleled literary brilliance!

Shen Qingqiu slapped the table. "Be straight with me: list out everything you planned but didn't write when you changed the outline. The important things first!"

"I don't know what's important or not, but there is a part that has to do with you…" Shang Qinghua stammered. "Or more precisely, that has to do with Shen Jiu. Before, I was always embarrassed to say…"

Upon hearing this, the hair on the back of Shen Qingqiu's neck stood up in horror. Knowing Airplane Flying Towards the Sky's shitty tendencies, it'd be a wonder if he had given Shen Qingqiu a normal backstory!

"Just tell me," he said, holding his head in his hands. "I can take it."

Shang Qinghua embarked on an impassioned explanation of his artistic concept. "I had a lot of ideas for the character of Shen Qingqiu. I had hoped to portray him as a well-rounded, three-dimensional character; he's scum, he's wretched, but he has reason to be scum, as well as a not-scummy side. But the readers didn't really buy it. As soon as I inserted signs of his development, they started griping in the reviews. So, I saw the winds weren't blowing the right way and immediately turned him into a tropey and wretched asshole. But really, he—"

Shen Qingqiu had turned his full attention to the explanation when suddenly, the maids outside the room chorused in a respectful tone, "My lord."

This is really the worst time you could have come!

At this, Shang Qinghua's expression transformed, and he jumped a meter off the floor like his butt had been lit on fire. Rushing toward the back door, he shouted over his shoulder, "That man of yours is here. Let's do it later—wait, I mean let's chat later!"

Don't go! Shen Qingqiu futilely reached out after him. *Screw your "Let's chat later"! Cutting off at this sort of point is even more unbearable than that cheesy cliché where the eyewitness at death's door says, "The killer was…was…" and then coughs up a mouthful of blood and* dies*!*

The green curtain lifted, and Luo Binghe stooped to enter the room. Shen Qingqiu immediately assumed an unruffled expression. However, because his very important and serious discussion had been cut off, he looked rather displeased. Luo Binghe's gaze alighted first on the Xiu Ya sword in his hand before shifting upward.

After a brief silence, Luo Binghe was still the one who spoke first. "It seems that Shizun has not slept at all these past few days."

Speaking of rest, Shen Qingqiu immediately thought of dreams; speaking of dreams, he couldn't help but remember all the embarrassing things he had done in the dream realm to console Luo Binghe. Shen

Qingqiu rubbed his nose and said, “If I could sleep without dreaming, I would be happy to.”

Luo Binghe’s eyelashes lowered slightly. After standing there for a while, he seemed to gather all his courage before his next words stiffly left his mouth. “Although I hid some things from Shizun in the dream realm, none of the feelings I revealed there were false.”

Shen Qingqiu sighed. “Luo Binghe, at present I really don’t know which of your words are true and which are false,” he said honestly. “Therefore, don’t bother saying such things.”

The Luo Binghe in that dream had indubitably been much cuter. Even though that dream protagonist was still this protagonist, his look then, with his insides all twisted up in misery—on a face that wasn’t half-bad, at that—left even a straight guy like Shen Qingqiu with no option but to pity on him. But the more pity Shen Qingqiu had felt then, the more painfully his face had been slapped after. Luo Binghe had claimed that the events in Jin Lan City were not his doing, and at the time, Shen Qingqiu had believed him about nine-tenths of the way. Now he didn’t dare entertain even one tenth of that belief.

Blood rushed to Luo Binghe’s face, reddening his cheeks. Lifting his eyelids, he said coldly, “Shizun’s only concern is being angry that I deceived him. But if I hadn’t done so, I’m afraid I still wouldn’t be able to speak a word to you.”

His fingers unconsciously clenched tighter and tighter on Xin Mo’s hilt, until his knuckles went white with the strain. A faint red glow extended from his pupils to even the rims of his eyes.

“As if Shizun never deceived me? You said you didn’t approve of assigning much importance to the difference between races, yet in the blink of an eye, you changed your tune and refused to admit it. For the five years after your death at Hua Yue City, I summoned your soul thousands of times, failing with every try, and trying again with every failure, but I never let my hopes grow cold. Despite this, I never suspected that Shizun would scorn me to this extent—to have already returned to the world, yet coldly look on as I lost my mind and made a fool of myself.”

At the end of Luo Binghe’s tirade, his final syllables were somewhat unsteady, the pitch of his voice rising in what could have been fury or exasperation. “Of course, Shizun has abundant reason to denounce me as a devil incarnate now. I’ve wrought disaster across the land. But why is it that even when I’d done nothing at all, I was still shunned like a snake or a scorpion? You’ve deceived me twice, and I’ve deceived you twice. Isn’t that entirely fair?”

Even though he felt this one-for-one, two-for-two logic was not even a fraction off the mark, Shen Qingqiu still couldn’t help but say, “You really cling to your grudges.”

Luo Binghe sneered. “I’m afraid Shizun has never seen what I’m like when I really hold a grudge against someone.” His face gradually settled into a grim expression, and he closed some of the distance between them. “But what if I said that when it comes to Shizun, I only cling to memories, not grudges? I probably wouldn’t be believed, would I.”

As the shadow Luo Binghe’s figure cast increased in size, Shen Qingqiu hurriedly said, “Compose yourself.”

If you want to talk, then talk properly. Don’t suddenly change attitudes, and don’t come so close!

“Shizun, you can always compose yourself,” Luo Binghe said in a low voice, “but I can no longer do the same.”

Shen Qingqiu hadn’t fully processed what exactly was going on when, with a thud, his back began to hurt. The next thing he knew, the two of them had already rolled onto the bed.

It’s been so long since I’ve slept on this bamboo bed—holy shit, it’s fucking hard!

Shen Qingqiu yelled, “You insolent—”

Luo Binghe pursed his lips and refused to speak. Just as Shen Qingqiu thought to kick him away, goosebumps erupted over his skin from head to toe. A hand had suddenly reached into his inner robe from the hem.

You’ve got to be kidding me!

He violently jerked his knee up, but Luo Binghe caught it with a single hand, using his momentum to press it against the side of Shen Qingqiu’s body.

Shen Qingqiu internally yelled “Crap!” a hundred times; he didn’t want to be forced into a position where he was lying under another person with his legs spread-eagle! He immediately snapped his torso upward, and with a well-timed burst of energy and a twist of his waist, flipped them over in a one-eighty reversal, pinning Luo Binghe under him. Xiu Ya unsheathed three inches, coldly pressing against Luo Binghe’s throat.

This was the first time in Shen Qingqiu’s life that anyone had forced themselves on him, and he had subsequently been forced into a rage. “So you’re trying to take advantage of your shizun? Hm? How filial!”

He was indeed at someone else’s mercy now, but no one could expect him to quietly submit just like that!

Luo Binghe’s escape routes and the vital point on his neck were all at Shen Qingqiu’s mercy, but his eyes were dazzlingly bright. Not fearing the sharp blade at his neck in the slightest, he grabbed Shen Qingqiu’s wrist with one hand, then braced the other one against the ground. With a vigorous lunge, he reversed their positions again. Of course, Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t let him do as he wished and jabbed at an acupoint with Xiu Ya’s hilt.

After a few such exchanges, they had brawled themselves into a heap. They rolled off the bed, tumbling the whole way, white flashes and sparks exploding in every direction, spiritual and demonic energy churning in a confused fog, spiritual blasts flying at random.

Shen Qingqiu had spent too long being a poser; he didn’t know how long it had been since he had fought in such a crude manner. Only after the brawl reached its peak did Shen Qingqiu have a sudden realization: *That’s not right—this is a cultivation novel. Why the fuck am I fighting with my bare hands? What sort of dumbass has a cannon he doesn’t use?!*

He immediately raised his hand, pumped it full of spiritual energy, and sent an earth-shattering punch toward Luo Binghe’s lower abdomen.

Luo Binghe took the blow bodily without making a sound.

To tell the truth, Shen Qingqiu hadn’t expected to truly hit Luo Binghe, but that didn’t stop this punch from feeling extremely satisfying. It was like all the pent-up anger that had been building in him for the past few days had been smashed out along with it.

Suddenly, the System chirped with a congratulatory notice:

****★ °*:.☆\\(∇)/$:*.°★* Congratulations~~ Satisfaction points +500!***

Shen Qingqiu was utterly speechless.

Luo Binghe was really…a tried-and-true masochist! The kind who was happy being roughed up—hit him once and earn five hundred satisfaction points! Even the System notification had become a lively and flirtatious emoji—and on top of that, it came with a never-before-seen pair of tildes. Shen Qingqiu had never met a greater weirdo in all the years of his life, and this weirdo was one he’d raised himself!

Shen Qingqiu was bemoaning the failure of his pedagogical results, but Luo Binghe wasn’t playing anymore. He flicked his right hand, and Shen Qingqiu accidentally released the spiritual energy he’d been holding. With a bang, it smashed a beautifully shaped hole in the ceiling. Dust drifted downward, blocked by Luo Binghe above him.

Luo Binghe’s hands tugged at Shen Qingqiu’s outer robes, easily tearing them apart. “Hit me all you want—you can’t kill me either way! This disciple gladly accepts Shizun’s instruction!” he said, a smile on his face.

But a mournful tone seemed to hide behind that smile. Distracted from even how his clothes were being torn off, Shen Qingqiu’s heart clenched, and he involuntarily stopped moving. But Luo Binghe didn’t give Shen Qingqiu any more time to pity him. Suddenly, a hand ripped open his inner robes and crept to his waist, skin to skin.

Shen Qingqiu went limp for a moment, then slammed his sword hilt into Luo Binghe’s forehead with a thud. “You beast!”

Luo Binghe seemed to have given up on himself. “If Shizun sees me as no better than a beast either way, I might as well live up to expectations.”

Shen Qingqiu wanted to laugh in anger, but suddenly his vision blurred, his body swayed, and Xiu Ya crashed to the ground. There was something wrenching at him, like his whole soul was about to be pulled out of his body. He could only go stiff. Luo Binghe also stopped his movements, shocked.

A mere moment later, Shen Qingqiu’s head began to hurt like it was going to explode. Countless shattered scenes flashed before his eyes at top speed—sometimes blank white, sometimes a pitch-black mass, and sometimes he even saw vague human figures. His eardrums stung from the sharp ringing in his ears.

Luo Binghe couldn’t spare a moment for caution. He hurriedly vaulted into a sitting position and reached out to hold Shen Qingqiu down, but he couldn’t manage to keep him still. It was like a giant pair of hands were roughly dragging Shen Qingqiu’s brains and soul out of his body, and he held his head, rolling back and forth on the ground as he struggled.

Something was screaming, stretching hands toward him from every direction, screeching and tearing at his soul.

“Shizun, I—I was just trying to scare you, don’t take it so seriously! What’s wrong?” Luo Binghe cried out in a panic.

Shen Qingqiu’s body thrashed back and forth in his embrace. Luo Binghe held him with one arm, hurriedly scanning his body with spiritual energy. And though there were no abnormalities, Shen Qingqiu’s screams were horribly shrill, as if a red-hot piece of iron had been poked right into his brain. Luo Binghe tried everything he could think of to no avail.

As Shen Qingqiu’s pulse grew weaker and weaker, Luo Binghe began to tremble faintly, then more and more violently. In the end, he couldn’t keep himself upright anymore, and he collapsed from his half-kneeling position until both his knees collided with the ground.

“Guards!” he yelled. “Every one of you, get in here!”

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Chapter 15:
Holy Mausoleum

SHEN QINGQIU'S EYES shot open.

It was pitch dark.

His heart raced, eardrums seeming to hammer alongside his pulse. In order to determine whether it was just so dark that he couldn't see his own hand in front of his face or if he had in fact gone blind, Shen Qingqiu really did stretch out his hand to test his vision. Before he got very far, his fingertips hit a sturdy wall.

Shen Qingqiu began to slowly feel around. After a while, he had a basic sense of his surroundings. He was currently inside a cramped space. It seemed he had been placed in a rectangular stone box. He lightly patted the stone walls to find that they were ice-cold, the material slick and smooth like marble. When he surveyed them with spiritual energy, he found that they weren't too thick, probably no more than four inches.

He felt around some more, sucked in a breath and held it, then abruptly struck out. With a rumble of spiritual energy, he landed a heavy blow in the center of the stone cover above him. After three strikes in a row, the darkness split apart into pieces along with the sound of shattering rock.

Fresh air poured in. Shen Qingqiu abruptly sat up and drew a few deep breaths before he discovered the air wasn't fresh at all. Instead, it was like underground air that had sat stagnant for years, and it was extremely thin. When he looked down, he found he was lying in a coffin.

This rectangular stone box was, it seemed, a finely sculpted stone casket, pure white like jade.

Shen Qingqiu placed a hand lightly on the edge of the coffin and leapt out. Looking around, he found he stood in a dimly lit stone room. The coffin whose lid he had blasted was placed on an altar in the center of the room, and disordered piles of dusty objects were strewn around the corners. Weapons, gemstones, books, bottles, and jars lay scattered about. The glint of blades and the glow of jewels shone beneath the thick layer of dust, sending faint light flowing about the room. The walls around Shen Qingqiu were painted with murals of demons in crazed revelry, surrounding him from all sides.

The Holy Mausoleum of the demon race. This was Shen Qingqiu's conclusion.

Before he could digest this information, he inadvertently looked down and was struck dumb by another piece of information: His body wasn't the one grown from the Sun-Moon Dew Mushroom. This was Shen Qingqiu's original body!

The Holy Mausoleum purportedly housed the means by which to revive the dead, and it looked like this really wasn't hearsay. Given the situation, it was likely that someone had snuck Shen Qingqiu's corpse into the Holy Mausoleum, then activated a soul summoning array, yanking him away from his new body.

The Holy Mausoleum was a restricted area for the demon race. Generations of supreme rulers had been entombed there after their deaths. Anyone who entered without having reached that lofty position would die. But Shen Qingqiu had been brought inside as a corpse, and only after his soul returned to his body had he started breathing again. By essentially taking advantage of a loophole, he'd gained the chance to play tourist.

Shen Qingqiu tried and found that the flow of his spiritual energy was perfectly fine. Luo Binghe said he had spent five years restoring the meridians of this body; this turned out to be true. As for the Without a Cure poison, Shen Qingqiu didn't feel any unresponsiveness at present, but he didn't know if its effects had been dispelled.

Once a soul had been placed into a body created from a Dew Mushroom, the second that soul was taken away, the body would quickly wither and die. Shen Qingqiu couldn't guess what sort of expression Luo Binghe would have on his face, standing in front of that withered and dried-up body of his…

But before his thoughts could drift, the System chirped with a message notification:

Gentle reminder: You have entered the advanced-level plot scenario, "The Holy Mausoleum." A "plot hole-filling" quest has been

issued. Please rise to the occasion and take the initiative.

Shen Qingqiu gave it an “oh” and continued to crouch in place.

Please rise to the occasion and take the initiative.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t move.

Alert: Please rise to—

“I know, I know! Off with you!”

What a pain in the ass. Shen Qingqiu exited the room, thinking back on the Holy Mausoleum subplot in the original novel as he walked. Residences in the demon realm were hidden beneath the earth while their mausoleums were built above ground. In short, all their customs were the complete opposite of the Human Realm’s. Not only was the mausoleum filled with layer upon layer of wicked mechanisms, there were also countless demonic beasts guarding the tombs, hidden in the shadows.

If it weren’t for the System’s diabolical chattering, he’d have to be on drugs to try wandering around these tomb corridors!

The corridors were extremely dark, but Shen Qingqiu didn’t use a fire spell. He held his breath and silently walked onward. Not long after, he began to hear the slow and heavy sound of breathing.

Or, he called it “breathing,” but it was actually more like the gasps of the dying. Shen Qingqiu stood still. They had shown up entirely too fast!

From the darkness, a lone, rail-thin figure gradually emerged. Next, a second and third followed right behind, slowly drifting closer like wandering souls. These figures swayed thrice with every step, getting closer and closer. Shen Qingqiu didn’t make a sound. Turning sideways, he slowed his breaths as much as possible.

Of all the demonic beasts guarding the tomb, these were one of the lowest level with the highest encounter rates: blind corpses.

Blind corpses were called “blind,” but in truth, they wanted for not a single eye. Instead, they had a few extra pairs more than other monsters, all squished onto their faces. It made for an incredibly bizarre sight, and they would definitely make anyone with trypophobia ache with disgust.

However, although they had a lot of eyes, the organs were basically useless. Most of the time, blind corpses were sightless even with their eyes open, their efficiency dismal as they wandered and patrolled the Holy Mausoleum. Though their eyes were both numerous and large, the organs were to a one very severely degenerated. However, these eyes were incredibly sensitive to light, and they could catch even the faintest reflected glow at top speed.

As soon as blind corpses caught sight of something, their manner would abruptly change, and they would instinctively launch a fierce attack at the source of illumination. At that time, they would no longer move at the speed they were now, as they slowly wandered the corridors in lines.

In short, monsters like this weren't frightening by themselves; what was frightening was a certain object that often appeared alongside them. As Shen Qingqiu thought this, a blind corpse tottered close, and he sidestepped to avoid it. Suddenly, a faint flame began to burn amidst the darkness.

This wisp of flame was a dim green. It glowed brighter and brighter until it illuminated the entire corridor with a vivid emerald hue. Those blind corpses about to brush past Shen Qingqiu suddenly turned around. On every face were embedded four or five pairs of giant bloodshot eyeballs, glaring straight at him where he stood just within reach.

Last-breath candles!

Shen Qingqiu moved with extraordinary speed, and in the next second, he had flashed to the end of the corridor. But no matter where he fled, a faint green light appeared alongside him, illuminating his figure with nowhere to hide. He was fast, but the blind corpses triggered by the light source were faster.

A few blind corpses threw themselves at Shen Qingqiu, and he sent them flying. Last-breath candles used the qi and breath of the living as fuel. As long as a living person or creature approached, they ignited on their own. At first, they sounded like random trinkets that could be used to play tricks while traveling the jianghu, but when deployed together with blind corpses, the effect was devastatingly brutal.

Think about it: If an intruder managed to get into the Holy Mausoleum, no matter where they went, they still had to breathe. Once they did, the candles ignited, and you couldn't put them *all* out. Any corner of the Holy Mausoleum could house arrays of last-breath candles. The throngs of blind corpses would then pounce, and only after the intruder's death would the candlelight gradually dim. Last breath, last breath, what an aptly chosen name!

Take now, for example. More and more blind corpses had arrived in response to the light, to the point that the tomb corridor was overflowing.

Shen Qingqiu rushed out of the corridor and stole into a room. This hall was much wider and more imposing, and in the center was a coffin, placed high up on an altar. Shen Qingqiu leapt up and tried to throw it open, but it didn't budge. When he tried to hit it again, there was a deep thud, but it still didn't move an inch. To think it was so much more solid than the stone casket he had found himself lying in earlier. Shen Qingqiu wondered if there was someone inside. He knocked on the lid: "Might I take shelter in your honored residence?!"

He was just saying whatever, but after he knocked a few times, a voice actually spoke from within the sarcophagus.

The voice was clearly coming from the coffin, but it was as clear as if the speaker was speaking into Shen Qingqiu's ear, not muffled at all.

"Do as you please," the voice said as if smiling.

A corpse come to life?!

Shen Qingqiu was terrified. He swept out his leg, knocking a few blind corpses off the stone casket, then in another few steps, jumped off the coffin himself and sent a spiritual blast at the ceiling. Loose rubble rolled down. Realizing that the stone of the ceiling was loosening, Shen Qingqiu continued to send out wild blows. He thought to collapse the ceiling and escape in the confusion, thereby burying both the blind corpses and this revived corpse beneath the rubble. But in the chaos of battle, he suddenly heard a low hiss coming from outside the tomb chamber.

Shen Qingqiu looked up. It was as if two yellow lanterns were lit outside the hall, a pair of huge golden eyes like bronze bells looking his way. Within each eye was a long, slitted pupil, lending them a malevolent air.

When those blind corpses heard that hiss, it was like they had suffered an incorporeal shock. They stopped in their savage pursuit and hunched their shoulders, heads lowered, huddling in a shivering mass.

Those lamp-like eyes held Shen Qingqiu's gaze for a while before they suddenly disappeared. A moment later, a figure strolled in from outside the hall. Shen Qingqiu wasn't surprised when he made out the newcomer's form. "Xizhi-lang."

Zhuzhi-Lang's feet nearly slipped out from under him. He rubbed his nose. Though he felt a bit glum, he didn't misplace his manners. "If Immortal Master Shen wishes to call me as such, he may do as he pleases," he said with a smile.

"So you really were the one who stole my corpse from Qiong Ding Hall," said Shen Qingqiu.

The poison that had left those disciples black and blue all over was likely a jade serpent's venom. The fact that Mu Qingfang had been unable to find injuries during his quick inspection was because the snake's teeth were fine and small, its bites difficult to discern. With a more thorough examination, you would find the imprints of teeth in hidden places like fingertips and heels.

"Everything happened so suddenly, and I could only resort to that inferior plan," said Zhuzhi-Lang. "I hope Immortal Master Shen will forgive me."

Shen Qingqiu gave a dry cough. The "everything" that "happened so suddenly" could only be referring to that time he used an entire town's supply of realgar wine to smoke out Zhuzhi-Lang. Shen Qingqiu had even forced him back to his original form and ridden him quite a ways.

"Your summoning me to the Holy Mausoleum," he said, "did resolve a certain…troublesome situation I had fallen into. Earlier, you invited me to the Demon Realm. Now that I'm here, can you tell me what exactly your goal is?"

"I have already explained the first reason to Immortal Master Shen," said Zhuzhi-Lang. "A drop of kindness should be repaid with a torrent. As for the second, I was not the one who summoned Immortal Master Shen… It may be best if you ask my lord directly."

"Very well. Where is Tianlang-Jun?" asked Shen Qingqiu.

Zhuzhi-Lang started. “I thought Immortal Master Shen and my lord had already greeted each other.”

Greeted each other? Shen Qingqiu looked down at that stone coffin. Was the reanimated corpse in there…Tianlang-Jun?

Strictly speaking, they hadn’t “greeted each other,” all right?!

The coffin that he had been unable to pry open no matter his efforts began to shake unceasingly and slowly slid open on its own. A person slowly sat up from inside. The person propped an elbow on the rim of the coffin and tilted his head with a faint smile. “Qing Jing Peak Lord, it’s an honor to meet you at last.”

Shen Qingqiu was stunned.

Though this family's interests and hobbies spanned a wide range, they managed some coincidental similarities anyway, having the same…unique style. The son liked to hold corpses, while the dad liked to lie around in coffins.

In appearance, Luo Binghe resembled his mother Su Xiyan, but you could more or less see the shadow of his father in him.

For example, in the eyes. Tianlang-Jun's eyes were deep-set, his brow strong and heroic, the irises dark like fathomless water. In this, he and Luo Binghe were very much alike. Luo Binghe had a pretty boy appearance in the first place, but if his eyes had resembled his mother's too, his face would have been excessively feminine and the effect would be lost.

For another example, the smile. Both the father and son's smiles gave Shen Qingqiu an indescribable kind of…ominous premonition.

"I have not been the peak lord for many years," Shen Qingqiu cautiously replied.

"Yet I have long awaited our meeting, Peak Lord Shen," Tianlang-Jun said, all smiles.

Shen Qingqiu felt it down to his bones, that one's force of personality could indeed only be determined by family background and upbringing. Putting aside everything else, if you sat both father and son in the same coffin in the same pose, Tianlang-Jun's kingly grace could make said coffin look like an emperor's throne. Luo Binghe, however, though he was handsome…uh, would probably still look like he was sitting in a coffin. No wonder Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky had felt threatened and given Tianlang-Jun's plotline the decisive axe.

Being in the same space as two heirs of the heavenly demon bloodline—with the many dried (or not-so-dried) mummies of demon nobles as onlookers—Shen Qingqiu was under a lot of pressure. "I wouldn't presume," he said with a smile that wouldn't reach his eyes. "Since your distinguished self has longed to meet me for such a while, why won't you c…come out to do so?"

No matter how much Tianlang-Jun might want to show off, hanging out in a coffin was a little too much. Unless—

Unless Tianlang-Jun couldn’t stand.

Tianlang-Jun’s hand tapped a slow rhythm on the coffin rim. His dark irises reflected the dim-green flames leaping about the tomb as he spoke in a delighted tone, “Of course. Would the peak lord assist me?”

Even if this was a trick, Shen Qingqiu could only forge on. He leaned forward a bit and stretched out a hand. “As you wish?”

Tianlang-Jun cheerfully took that hand and stood. So he wasn’t concealing any weaknesses after all. Shen Qingqiu was a bit disappointed. Then the weight pulling on his arm disappeared.

However, he was clearly still holding Tianlang-Jun’s forearm. Shen Qingqiu shifted his gaze downward. He was indeed still holding it, but the forearm was the *only* thing he was holding.

Shen Qingqiu’s face was blank.

Tianlang-Jun had lost an arm, and one of his sleeves was empty, but he remained polite. “Ah. It came off again. Would the peak lord please hand that to me?”

Shen Qingqiu said nothing. His hand didn’t conduct the trembling of his spirit, and he calmly returned the severed arm to Tianlang-Jun. He and Zhuzhi-Lang both wore expressions that suggested this was all normal, and with a click—really, a *click*—Tianlang-Jun snapped the arm back into place. Snapped it back into place!

Are you a fucking doll?! Your joints can be attached and detached just like that?!

Shen Qingqiu noticed that the flesh at the severed end, as well as in many other patches upon that arm, had turned violet-black, looking especially frightful against Tianlang-Jun’s pale skin. There were even faint dark patches creeping out from beneath his collar.

Shen Qingqiu struggled with himself for a while. With a flutter of a butterfly’s wing, he had raised more than a mere tidal wave. His initial guess that Zhuzhi-Lang had used the Dew Mushroom to create a new body for Tianlang-Jun had turned out completely correct. However, it seemed that this Dew Mushroom body could not provide Tianlang-Jun with a satisfactory experience.

The reason Shen Qingqiu's soul had meshed well with the Dew Mushroom was twofold. First, the Dew Mushroom had been grown using his blood and qi, and second, the Dew Mushroom was a product of spiritual qi, and Shen Qingqiu also cultivated with a base of spiritual qi. In essence, the two were entirely compatible.

However, Tianlang-Jun's situation differed. He was a demon, and he cultivated with a base of demonic qi. The Dew Mushroom naturally reacted by rejecting him, and as expected, it seemed there was no freshness guarantee on his new body. So a situation wherein the body had begun deteoriating was entirely possible.

Tianlang-Jun rotated the reattached limb, then smiled. "My apologies. Come to think of it, Peak Lord Shen shares some of the credit in enabling us to leave Bai Lu Mountain."

Shen Qingqiu looked at Zhuzhi-Lang, who still stood silently off to the side. The snake-man form he had possessed back in Bai Lu Forest had truly been…a spectacle too awful to behold. Even so, in all the years Tianlang-Jun had been sealed under Bai Lu Mountain, Zhuzhi-Lang had never left its vicinity. And upon obtaining the Dew Mushroom, he hadn't used it for himself, but created a new body for his master without the slightest hesitation.

What a paragon of loyalty!

Shen Qingqiu scanned the tomb's murals out of the corner of his eye as he half-heartedly kept up the conversation. "The credit belongs to Xi… Zhuzhi-Lang. He laid low around Bai Lu Mountain for years until his chance finally came. With such a capable subordinate, Tianlang-Jun is someone to be admired."

"Have you heard my nephew's motto?" asked Tianlang-Jun.

"I have. A drop of kindness must be repaid by a torrent, isn't it?"

Zhuzhi-Lang's face went red, turning it an eerie color under the green candlelight. "My lord, Immortal Master Shen, please do not mock me."

Shen Qingqiu had no such intentions. He was, at present, turning the bulk of his focus toward the murals. These murals were brightly colored, their brushstrokes wild, but he could tell that the one directly across from the door was a giant woman's face. Her eyes were curved and the corners of her lips upturned, the expression of someone overtaken by joy. Without a doubt, of the three holy tomb halls of Delight, Fury, and Sorrow, this hall was the Hall of Delight.

Tianlang-Jun hadn’t noticed anything strange. “He’s always been like this, somewhat hardheaded and inflexible. So, he kept entreating me to bring you here to the Demon Realm.”

Shen Qingqiu still didn’t understand this logic. Collecting his thoughts, he gave Zhuzhi-Lang a look. “Does bringing me to the Demon Realm have anything to do with repaying a favor?”

“Of course it does,” said Tianlang-Jun with ease. “Because none of the four major sects will be allowed to survive. If Peak Lord Shen were still at Cang Qiong Mountain Sect now, you would be included with them. So obviously he didn’t want you to stay there.”

Shen Qingqiu didn’t know how to continue this conversation.

Just before, he’d thought this fellow a reasonable sort, but after conversing he’d discovered that Tianlang-Jun was no different from all those final boss villains who set their heart on the ambitious life goal of “destroying the world and massacring all the heroes.”

But come to think of it, if a nice young man of noble lineage was sealed under a mountain by a bunch of strange cultivators for that many years, it wasn’t surprising that he would turn out resentful.

Shen Qingqiu went silent for a moment, then tried to give a cooperative response. “Is the next step exterminating the entire human race?”

“Why would you think so?” asked Tianlang-Jun, confused. “Of course not. I like humans; I just don’t like the four major sects.” He smiled and added, “On the contrary, I have a gift for the Human Realm.”

Though Shen Qingqiu didn’t know what sort of gift this was, it definitely wasn’t something you could put a ribbon on and expect to make people happy!

A roast was just about to leave Shen Qingqiu’s mouth, somewhat rusty though he was, when suddenly, a tremor spread through the whole tomb hall.

Sand and pebbles tumbled loose from the ceiling. Even though Shen Qingqiu was standing firmly, he still swayed back and forth, and he even heard the faint and distant sounds of some creature's earthshaking roar. Alarmed, he said, "What is that?"

Tianlang-Jun listened closely for a moment. "This is even faster than I anticipated." He turned to Zhuzhi-Lang. "How many?"

"At least two hundred," Zhuzhi-Lang said.

Tianlang-Jun laughed. "Capturing even ten would be impressive enough. He's gone to some trouble."

Shen Qingqiu didn't understand this exchange, and it didn't look like they were going to loop him in either.

Tianlang-Jun swept a smattering of dust and sand from his shoulders. "Peak Lord Shen, for five years, my nephew has been putting his all into helping you make a clean break from Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. What do you think? Will you go with him?"

The abduction is already done and I'm here in this tomb, so why the hell are you asking this now? Shen Qingqiu paused. *Wait, five years ago? A clean break?*

Shen Qingqiu's heart thumped. He blurted out, "That sower in Jin Lan City was meant to be a catalyst for 'a clean break' with my sect?" No matter how you thought about it, the reasons he could never return to his sect all stemmed from the events in Jin Lan City. "You ordered that sower to single me out?"

Zhuzhi-Lang lowered his head.

Tianlang-Jun patted his nephew's shoulder as if in encouragement. "That was originally a little experiment to relieve the famine for the southern border demons, but Peak Lord Shen also happened to be present. Zhuzhi-Lang merely wanted to completely remove Peak Lord Shen's desire to remain in the Human Realm."

Shen Qingqiu immediately turned a furious glare toward Zhuzhi-Lang. *This is what you call reciprocating in kind? Getting a sower to slander me—the hell?! Of course a snake's way of repaying a favor would be utterly ridiculous!*

“Immortal Master Shen,” Zhuzhi-Lang said quietly, “since my lord has said he will eliminate the four major sects, he definitely won’t leave a single survivor… This humble one truly hopes that at that time…”

Shen Qingqiu shoved down his anger. “Did you bring Qiu Haitang too?”

“I don’t know this name,” said Tianlang-Jun.

He looked at Zhuzhi-Lang, and the latter immediately turned to Shen Qingqiu to clarify. “This humble one did not bring that woman.”

So had the pincer attack between the sower’s accusations and Qiu Haitang’s sudden appearance, which had forced Shen Qingqiu to surrender to imprisonment in Huan Hua Palace’s Water Prison, really been only coincidence? Oh, whatever. Now that things had come to this, it probably didn’t matter.

“What about the other reasons?” asked Shen Qingqiu.

“I indeed had some of my own reasons to summon Peak Lord Shen here,” Tianlang-Jun replied. He continued slowly, “I must thank Peak Lord Shen for taking exceptional care of that son of mine all these years.”

Though Shen Qingqiu already suspected that Luo Binghe was involved, his heart still clenched. He forcibly collected his thoughts and asked, “Luo Binghe? What does this have to do with him?”

Tianlang-Jun let out a chuckle and looked down. “How should I start? I discovered that for Peak Lord Shen, the feelings he nurses are especially…”

He spoke vaguely and didn’t even answer the question, but it wasn’t difficult for Shen Qingqiu to string together an extensive chain of connections.

The longer Tianlang-Jun used this body, the stronger his demonic energy became. In turn, the more his cultivation recovered, the more tattered his body became, filling in with those dark patches. Sooner or later, he would need a new body. This body would ideally belong to one of his blood relations, a fellow heir of the heavenly demon bloodline. If it contained two separate cultivation systems due to mixed parentage, so much the better.

Who could be more suitable than Luo Binghe?

Shen Qingqiu squinted. “You summoned my soul to draw him to the Holy Mausoleum?”

“Peak Lord Shen understands,” Tianlang-Jun said.

“Luo Binghe has yet to assume the seat you once had,” Shen Qingqiu reminded him. “He can’t enter the mausoleum. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t.”

However, Tianlang-Jun seemed to have great faith in Luo Binghe. “As long as he wants to enter, he definitely can.”

Shen Qingqiu said slowly, “No matter what you want to do, he’s still your son.”

“Indeed.”

“Your child by Su Xiyan.”

“So?”

Now Shen Qingqiu was sure. In the few words Tianlang-Jun had said about Luo Binghe, though his faint smile had not disappeared, an apathetic detachment had been evident within his words and expression.

This Tianlang-Jun was far different from the deeply passionate and pacifistic character that Shen Qingqiu had originally envisioned. When he mentioned Su Xiyan, his voice didn’t even tremble. He liked to call Luo Binghe “that son of mine,” but he didn’t seem to possess any concept of fatherly affection. Not only was he not a pacifist, he wasn’t even someone who believed that love prevailed over all. He had completely toppled Shen Qingqiu’s long-held (one-sided) preconceptions.

In truth, this was quite normal. Demons were cold and unfeeling when it came to relationships; they were more inclined to the pleasures of good food and the admiration of strength and power. But it shouldn’t have amounted to such an utterly uncaring attitude. Shen Qingqiu was a bit uncomfortable.

Luo Binghe was in fact…someone who was unloved by even his own parents.

Shen Qingqiu had always placed the black pot of blame for Jin Lan City on Luo Binghe's head. It seemed that child had been wronged all this time, and he had attempted to explain himself again and again, to no avail. When they had parted not long ago, Shen Qingqiu had even viciously gouged at him with his words.

He was rather dissatisfied with Tianlang-Jun, but if he thought about it honestly, he hadn't done much better himself. He had hurt Luo Binghe even deeper than his father had—this was the critical failure.

The tomb hall fell into a deathly silence. Only when a second round of tremors descended, accompanied by the roars of hundreds of beasts, did their stalemate break. The quakes this time were even fiercer, the force nearly strong enough to collapse everything around them.

Shen Qingqiu wasn't able to stay upright no matter how steady his footing, and he put one hand on the coffin. "Can someone tell me what exactly this—"

Before he could finish the word "is," the gemstone-studded ceiling overhead suddenly collapsed, coming down in chunks. All three people inside the tomb reacted quickly and dodged far away. With a deafening thud, something heavy crashed down and landed in the center of the tomb hall. Amidst thick roiling dust and the haphazard glint of gems, an enormous black shadow appeared.

Luo Binghe stood atop a pitch-black giant beast, sable robes fluttering amidst pale dust. Xin Mo was partly unsheathed behind him, cutting an imposing figure, and two eyes overflowing with crimson light gazed down, full of murderous intent.

At first glance, that great beast appeared to be some sort of rhinoceros with a single horn arcing from its forehead, curved like the crescent moon. But when it opened its mouth and let out a cry, a giant scarlet python uncurled from its blood-red maw. The rhinoceros's bellow mixed with the python's hissing shriek and made for a particularly stunning impression.

In the flesh! A Black! Moon! Rhinoceros! Python!

Black + Moon + Rhinoceros + Python. So the Black Moon Rhinoceros-Python really was just a simple combination of these four elements. “Great Master” Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky’s naming sense was as dependable as always!

Zhuzhi-Lang dutifully moved to stand in front of Tianlang-Jun, in the process also getting in front of Shen Qingqiu. Furthermore, as soon as Shen Qingqiu saw Luo Binghe, he subconsciously scooted closer to Zhuzhi-Lang’s back. It wasn’t like he was desperate to avoid Luo Binghe, but he had a guilty conscience and didn’t have the face to look at him. He dared even less to consider what Luo Binghe might be feeling, having seen Shen Qingqiu breathe his last before his eyes a second time. He could only unconsciously avoid the issue by not allowing himself to look, pretending that if he couldn’t see, he wouldn’t be bothered.

Tianlang-Jun raised an eyebrow. This expression too bore a remarkable resemblance to something Luo Binghe might wear. “So he didn’t hesitate to capture two hundred Black Moon Rhinoceros-Pythons to break the barrier around the Holy Mausoleum. Peak Lord Shen, this son of mine truly goes to extraordinary lengths for you.”

Shen Qingqiu had no retort. This was the rare demonic beast that, in the original work, summoned even the Endless Abyss with its call. Luo Binghe had gone as far as to capture two hundred at once in order to break into the Holy Mausoleum.

Only after the dust settled could Shen Qingqiu clearly see that Luo Binghe had indeed broken into the Holy Mausoleum all by himself. To the demon race, the Holy Mausoleum was both sacred ground and a restricted area. Either one merited reverence from the local demons, so they wouldn’t dare commit any violations. This was a question of faith, so no one had dared come with Luo Binghe. Of course he could only do it alone.

“Your courage is commendable,” said Tianlang-Jun. “However, while your coming here is of no great consequence, you shouldn’t have brought those two strays.”

Luo Binghe leapt down from the rhinoceros-python’s head, a dark expression on his face. As if that great beast had exhausted the last of its energy and could continue no longer, it collapsed to the ground with a crash. Luo Binghe fixed an unwavering glare on Shen Qingqiu, sparks flying from his eyes: he looked furious, yet also as if he was about to cry. Shen Qingqiu suddenly realized that when he’d ducked behind Zhuzhi-

Lang a moment ago, it had looked too much like he was avoiding Luo Binghe again.

But he didn't have the time to explain right now. The person standing beside him was the male lead's dad—the one who even the author had confirmed had a crushing power advantage over the protagonist in all respects!

Shen Qingqiu finally got a sound out of his throat. "Go back!"

Luo Binghe didn't respond. With a flick of his hand, he tossed Xiu Ya over, and only after seeing Shen Qingqiu catch the sword did he turn to face the other two people in the mausoleum hall. After gathering two fiercely roiling masses of demonic energy in his palms, Luo Binghe's figure flickered and he flung them straight forward.

Fighting already?

Luo Binghe's left hand smashed into Zhuzhi-Lang's abdomen, sending him flying without a moment of suspense. His right hand bore down on Tianlang-Jun. Shen Qingqiu went tense, focusing his full attention on the scene.

Yet Tianlang-Jun caught the blow: without retreating even a single step, he flipped his hand and lightly swept it downward, palm brushing across Luo Binghe's shoulder.

Shen Qingqiu swore he could hear the bones breaking within Luo Binghe's body. As if in confirmation, Luo Binghe blinked, then without warning, coughed up a mouthful of blood.

The entirety of his chin, neck, and chest were stained red, and the blood continued to drip down to the ground. Luo Binghe wiped the corner of his mouth, looking a bit confused. To tell the truth, it had been a long time since he had been injured to the point of spitting blood.

Wasn't! It! Laid! Down! In! Law! That! The! Protagonist! Has! OP! Plot! Armor?! Have we switched to screwing over the protagonist now that we're done screwing with the reader?!

Tianlang-Jun had given Luo Binghe only a light tap on the shoulder, but that arm of his came off again. Tianlang-Jun furrowed his brow, and

Zhuzhi-Lang immediately scooped up the arm and presented it with both hands.

Luo Binghe stopped wiping at his blood and reached behind him to grab Xin Mo from its place on his back, a dangerous glint flashing through his eyes.

“That sword is a good blade,” remarked Tianlang-Jun. “It’s just a pity that your technique is a hideous mess.”

“Come with me!” Luo Binghe called to Shen Qingqiu.

“It’s too late,” said Zhuzhi-Lang. “Two hundred rhinoceros-pythons were sufficient to open the Holy Mausoleum’s barrier for only an instant—just enough to let you in.”

“Then I’ll use the two of you as blood sacrifices to open it again!”

But who could have expected that before Xin Mo fully left its sheath, it would be thrust back inside? At some point, Tianlang-Jun had moved to stand behind Luo Binghe, and he pressed the sword back into its sheath with a single finger, completely preventing Luo Binghe from drawing it. Luo Binghe’s reaction was also extraordinarily swift—he turned to respond. But no matter how fast he moved, he only ever managed to draw Xin Mo three inches at most before it was shoved back in. After a few of these exchanges, Tianlang-Jun seemed to lose interest in teasing Luo Binghe, and with a flick of his wrist, he ignored Xin Mo and directly pressed down on Luo Binghe’s skull instead.

Luo Binghe’s eyes snapped open. A dense cloud of purple-black qi roiled atop his head. Tianlang-Jun lifted his hand, took a look at Luo Binghe’s snow-pale face, and commented indifferently, “He looks like his mother.”

“His eyes look like yours,” came a chill voice from the side.

Tianlang-Jun slowly turned his head. Cold light glimmered off Xiu Ya’s blade as it pressed against Zhuzhi-Lang’s neck.

“It would be a bad deal for you to lose such a good subordinate and darling nephew,” Shen Qingqiu said with a faint smile. “Shouldn’t Tianlang-Jun take the time to consider that?”

“My lord, this subordinate was incautious,” Zhuzhi-Lang said quietly.

Even when he was being “incautious,” Zhuzhi-Lang had been rather difficult to get a hold of. It had taken a great deal of effort on Shen Qingqiu’s part just to restrain him. Even when he wasn’t in snake form, this fellow was just as slippery!

“Zhuzhi-Lang is a bit foolish; he’s quite emotionally fragile,” Tianlang-Jun said lightly. “If you treat him like this, you’ll break his heart.”

“My lord, I… I’m not foolish…” Zhuzhi-Lang weakly protested.

“Meanwhile, I’m not emotionally fragile at all, but I am heartbroken that you’re treating my disciple like this,” Shen Qingqiu said, half-serious. “Release my disciple and I’ll release your nephew, all right?”

Tianlang-Jun spread his hands. “I’m just afraid I won’t have the chance.”

In truth, Shen Qingqiu’s palms were clammy with cold sweat; his voice was the only thing calm and collected about him. “I’m giving you the chance right now.”

“I meant,” Tianlang-Jun said, “that I’m afraid Zhuzhi-Lang won’t give me the chance.”

Tianlang-Jun had barely finished speaking when Zhuzhi-Lang suddenly threw himself at Shen Qingqiu’s swordpoint. The force he used was extraordinary, like it really was a matter of life-and-death, and Shen Qingqiu didn’t for a moment suspect he was feinting. He startled and subconsciously withdrew his blade. As soon as he did, Zhuzhi-Lang seized the opportunity to escape and dashed back to Tianlang-Jun’s side.

Tianlang-Jun made a “See?” sort of expression and chuckled, “I told you, Zhuzhi-Lang is a bit foolish. If someone tried to hold him hostage against me, he would seek death himself. Peak Lord Shen must not underestimate him.”

Shen Qingqiu almost coughed up blood. Zhuzhi-Lang really had no value to speak of as a hostage. Not only was he hard to catch, even after you finally got ahold of him, it didn’t feel like a worthwhile venture at all!

“But since my nephew had to suffer this little grievance,” Tianlang-Jun said, “it’s only reasonable to recoup the loss on Peak Lord Shen’s disciple.”

As he spoke, his fingers slightly curled. Luo Binghe let out a stifled groan and blood flowed from the corners of his eyes. But those eyes still turned toward Shen Qingqiu with great difficulty, and he ground out through the blood foaming in his mouth, “Go… Anywhere you want… Just don’t stay here!”

Shen Qingqiu snapped his head up and threw Xiu Ya forward. It streaked toward Tianlang-Jun like an arc of white lightning. But Tianlang-Jun only barely tilted his head, and the blade brushed by his cheek before nailing into the mural far behind him with a clang.

“Your aim isn’t very good,” said Tianlang-Jun.

“It *is* very good.” Shen Qingqiu slowly pulled his arm back, and a faint smile curved the corner of his mouth. “I hit bullseye.”

Tianlang-Jun paused, then immediately turned around only to see that Xiu Ya was stabbed into the mural, right inside the smiling woman’s eye. The jewel that had been inlaid as her pupil shattered into pieces, which fell from the stone wall in a twinkling shower.

That woman was undoubtedly just a face painted on the wall, but the corners of her smiling mouth curved higher and higher, like she herself was growing happier and happier. The change continued until the split of her mouth reached her ears, like she was grinning with the Slit-Mouthed Woman’s bloody maw.

Suddenly, a burst of piercing laughter erupted in the mausoleum hall, and this sound came from the mural woman’s mouth.

The Hall of Delight had anti-theft measures. The mural was inlaid all over with precious stones, but if you pried out even a single one, you could only sit and wait to be laughed to death by the Hall of Delight’s demoness and her sound wave attack!

The effect of this laughter was especially evident on demons. After all, the primary intruders the defenses were designed to target were roving demonic tomb raiders; scant few humans were bored or gutsy enough to go tomb raiding in the Demon Realm. Upon hearing this laughter, your heart and brain would pound without end, there’d be a wave of acute pain, and the world around you would spin about as your vision blurred. Zhuzhi-Lang couldn’t help but cover his ears, and Tianlang-Jun also spared a hand to press against his temple.

Shen Qingqiu had long been prepared for this turn of events, and using this split second of opportunity, he swept across the hall. With a wave of his left hand, Xiu Ya flew back into its sheath, and with his right hand, he grabbed Luo Binghe and *ran*.

As soon as he charged into the next mausoleum hall, the first thing Shen Qingqiu did was drop the gates and drop them tight. The enormous, heavy slab of stone thudded to the ground, stirring up a cloud of dust. He could only find the mechanism to close the door but not the one the one to open it—although it would be ideal if this door didn’t open at all. As soon as he had this thought and was finally able to relax, he turned his head. What he saw made him collapse to his knees on the spot.

Zhuzhi-Lang blinked at Shen Qingqiu, one arm held tightly in his grasp.

He’d really done it this time. He’d actually managed to leave the father-son duo, currently engaged in one-sided domestic violence, within the Hall of Delight. This was too severe of an offense. A criminal case was about to happen in there! Shen Qingqiu whipped his arm away, turned, and went to strike at the stone door, but Zhuzhi-Lang stopped him.

“Immortal Master Shen, don’t go back. He has no chance against my lord.”

Shen Qingqiu was on the verge of collapse. How could he have grabbed the wrong person from such a close distance? The Hall of Delight mural woman’s laughing attack must have been too strong, the light from those green candles too dim, and on top of that, all three of the other men were wearing black robes that looked about the same at first glance. Was it because they were relatives that their tastes in color and style were basically identical?!

“Immortal Master Shen didn’t grab the wrong person,” said Zhuzhi-Lang. “I swapped out the arm you grabbed.”

This was the last straw for Shen Qingqiu, and he slammed a fist into the stone door. “I was trying to take Luo Binghe!”

“Immortal Master Shen, didn’t he already take you…long ago?” Zhuzhi-Lang paused and asked in confusion.

Shen Qingqiu was speechless. There really was no way to talk to these people! He raised a hand, gesturing for Zhuzhi-Lang to shut up. Then he turned and walked a few steps, but suddenly realized that the floor beneath his feet wasn’t entirely smooth. When Zhuzhi-Lang tried to follow him, he hurriedly held out an arm to stop him. “Don’t move!”

An enormous woman’s face was painted across the entire floor of this grand hall. They were currently standing on her ear. Unlike the woman in the Hall of Delight, this face had none of that flirtatious beauty. Instead, it was fierce and fiendish, its narrow eyes bulging in rage above a wide nose. The effect was unsurpassably hideous, looking just like a female yaksha.[1]

“Don’t step on the face.” Shen Qingqiu said with caution.

Zhuzhi-Lang was silent. This whole floor was a face; where would you step if not on the face…?

The three halls of Delight, Fury, and Sorrow came one after the other. After the first, the Hall of Delight, the Hall of Fury immediately followed.

When the original Luo Binghe had toured (read: looted) the Holy Mausoleum, he had cleared this level by using a special sequence of steps to cross it. Unfortunately, Shen Qingqiu didn’t clearly remember where exactly he had stepped. If a single one was wrong, the anti-theft measures in the Hall of Fury activated. You couldn’t even fly over the face on your sword, because as long as you passed directly above any spot on the floor, it counted as a step.

That said, of course you’d get angry if someone stepped on your face—no wonder this was the Hall of Fury!

Shen Qingqiu had the gall to rush in here because he thought he’d grabbed Luo Binghe, who definitely knew the step sequence. But he never could have expected that this snake would be slippery enough to swap himself in within a split second!

The ground grew hotter and hotter. The woman’s face on the ground had originally been a scarlet hue, but it darkened to crimson as the heat surged. Shen Qingqiu crouched down to test the temperature, but he had to pull his hand back as soon as it touched the ground. It was as hot as if a fire blazed beneath the floor, and even standing on it would roast you like meat on a hot plate. They must have unknowingly stepped on the face a few times already. Shen Qingqiu retreated a few steps, getting as close to the edge of the room as possible.

Suddenly, a red liquid burst out from the ground in a fountain, blazing with a searing-bright golden glow.

Zhuzhi-Lang immediately shifted into his original form. A yellow-eyed green snake coiled on the ground, scales aglow. He reared his upper body and let out a hissing cry, reaching the height of four men, then wrapped Shen Qingqiu in a mass of coils, enveloping him securely within a layer of scaly armor. In this position, Zhuzhi-Lang's gleaming fangs were right next to Shen Qingqiu's head, and those giant golden eyes were even more unsettling from up close.

Tianlang-Jun was right, Xizhi-Lang really was a bit foolish. Had he forgotten that time he'd been drenched in realgar fumes to the point of tears? Had he forgotten how Shen Qingqiu pointed a sword at him just minutes ago? With how hard Zhuzhi-Lang was working to protect him even now, Shen Qingqiu was practically too embarrassed to take advantage of him again.

Suddenly, with an enormous crash, an entire wall of the Hall of Fury collapsed.

Tianlang-Jun rotated his wrist as he made his way down the pile of rubble, through the floating dust, and stepped into the hall. "Am I mistaken or does Peak Lord Shen seem more familiar with this Holy Mausoleum than even me?"

Zhuzhi-Lang transformed back into human form. "My lord, don't come in!" he cried.

Before a questioning expression could appear on Tianlang-Jun's face, he had already taken six or seven steps across the woman's face on the floor.

Shen Qingqiu was speechless.

Zhuzhi-Lang was speechless too.

A pillar of magma, thick enough for four men to encircle with their arms outstretched, exploded upward. Tianlang-Jun was instantly engulfed in the raging blaze.

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

Shen Qingqiu internally howled with laughter. *See what happens when you don't let others finish talking! See what happens when you beat up your darling son! You can act badass, act as hard as you can, but pride goes before the fall!*

However, very soon, he was unable to laugh any further. Luo Binghe staggered as he followed close behind Tianlang-Jun and also charged in. One of his arms hung slack at his side like it had been completely broken, blood poured from his head, and one of his eyes couldn't even open anymore.

How wretched. Luo Binghe was in an even worse state than when Shen Qingqiu first laid eyes on him upon his arrival in this world—when the original flavor had beaten him. What was up with Luo Binghe's constitution? Why did his elders all like to teach him lessons with violence? *This isn't Bai Zhan Peak!*

Zhuzhi-Lang anxiously circled that pillar of fire, too preoccupied for anything else. Luo Binghe scanned the scene within the hall, then looked down. He jumped from the pile of rubble and took a few rapid steps before arriving at Shen Qingqiu's side in a flash.

This was just unscientific. How come a single glance was all he needed to know where to step so as not to trigger the mechanism?

As if Luo Binghe knew what he was thinking, he concisely explained himself: "Step on the acupoints."

As he spoke, he and Shen Qingqiu had already crossed the Hall of Fury and entered the next room. While the stone gate lowered, Shen Qingqiu couldn't help but take a few more glances at Luo Binghe, confirming that this time, he didn't have the wrong person.

Shen Qingqiu hesitated at the periphery of the mausoleum hall, afraid to make a hasty move. The demoness of the Hall of Sorrow was perched on the zenith of the hall. When he looked up, as expected, a woman's face was drawn there with her brows tightly knit in an expression of graceful woe.

Sensing the intruders, the face's eyes opened, and its features twisted into an even more miserable expression. A few drops of water seeped from its eyes, and before long, a dense rain drizzled down from the entire ceiling.

Shen Qingqiu was just about to speak up and warn Luo Binghe that this was corpse rain, that they ought not let it touch their bodies, when Luo Binghe raised one of his arms to cover Shen Qingqiu and ran straight across. Just like that, Shen Qingqiu was dragged through the level at top speed.

The original Luo Binghe had favored exacting technique. What was up with him now? This method was far too simple and crude!

The three Halls of Delight, Fury, and Sorrow were a subplot that had stretched on for two hundred thousand words. If one converted the events that had just transpired, it wouldn't amount to a single chapter! The Hall of Sorrow should have dragged on for at least ten before it concluded, but now? Was that even enough for three lines?!

The System chirped out a notification: ***Cut down on filler plot; refined the story line. B-Points +100!***

This was too much cutting!

After they exited the three holy halls, they found themselves in a dark and silent corridor. As soon as they entered it, green flames lit up dimly, row after row, stretching endlessly into the distance.

The anti-theft measures of the Holy Mausoleum were practically dense enough to ward off a fly, and to an insane degree. Last-breath candle arrays were piled everywhere like they didn't cost a cent, and the blind corpses that had been wandering aimlessly in the earlier corridors now approached, saliva dripping from their mouths. Luo Binghe raised his hand, a cold and impatient look on his face. The corpses let out a series of low, lamenting hisses, panting breaths rumbling in their throats, before retreating into the shadows with lowered heads.

Without sparing Shen Qingqiu a glance, Luo Binghe put his hand down and said, "Let's go."

Shen Qingqiu noticed that Luo Binghe's face was incredibly red. Under the dim green candlelight, the color was exceedingly obvious. But it absolutely didn't seem like a blush of embarrassment. Every time Luo

Binghe caught Shen Qingqiu before, he had stared at him like he was trying to stare through him, but this time, he didn't so much as look. Upon realizing that Shen Qingqiu was looking at him, Luo Binghe even avoided his gaze, subconsciously using his unbroken left hand to wipe away the bloodstains by his eyes.

Shen Qingqiu wondered if Luo Binghe had been poisoned, or if maybe he had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage during the fight, but Luo Binghe's gait was still steady, so it didn't seem like that was the issue.

He was just about to ask when Luo Binghe spoke first. "Are the meridians of that body working well?"

Shen Qingqiu had never expected this to be Luo Binghe's first question. He paused, then replied, "They're working normally."

It seemed that every time they fell into a silence, Luo Binghe was the first to break it. Though when he thought about it, Luo Binghe *had* spent five years fixing every one of this body's meridians, bit by bit.

Luo Binghe nodded. "That's good. I preserved the other body for a few days, but it still withered in the end. That doesn't bode well if anything goes wrong with this one."

Once the soul left a body created by the Dew Mushroom, it instantly died, then went on to wither and dissolve. For Luo Binghe to have actually sustained it for several days… Who knew how much spiritual energy he had wasted on the endeavor? And he'd still dared to storm the Holy Mausoleum by himself right afterward. Shen Qingqiu felt a tightness in his chest, and his thoughts were a scattered and uneasy mess as he tried to find some random topic of conversation. Tianlang-Jun had mentioned that Luo Binghe "brought two strays" with him, so Shen Qingqiu asked, "Who else did you bring?"

Luo Binghe finally gave him a glance. "I came alone," he said. Then, "Those two aren't good companions." He continued only after a pause. "Even if Shizun doesn't want to stay with me, I hope he wouldn't associate with them."

It sounded like this wasn't Luo Binghe's first rendezvous with Tianlang-Jun and Zhuzhi-Lang. "You've met them before?" Shen Qingqiu asked.

"I engaged that snake on the southern border," Luo Binghe said mildly. "We fought a few times, and he nearly got the better of me. I've never seen the other one before, but I couldn't defeat him."

Zhuzhi-Lang was from the southern border, so he'd naturally be at his best in that environment. Tianlang-Jun had said that the Jin Lan City plague was originally wrought to resolve a food shortage in that territory. It was to be expected that Luo Binghe might have fought Zhuzhi-Lang there.

But it seemed that Zhuzhi-Lang had never explained his identity to Luo Binghe, nor had he treated him as the young master of the family. Tianlang-Jun didn't seem inclined to do so either. So, it looked like neither the father nor the cousin had any intention of acknowledging Luo Binghe.

Though Luo Binghe's stride was steady, he walked with a faint limp. But he kept his back straight, and he didn't use the wall to support himself. Shen Qingqiu felt mixed emotions at the sight of this. After awkwardly hesitating for a moment, he steeled his resolve and stepped forward to support Luo Binghe.

Just then, the candles suddenly flickered. The tomb corridor dimmed, and Luo Binghe loomed over him.

However, this time, Luo Binghe didn't pull him into a forceful embrace, nor did he get handsy. He just completely collapsed onto Shen Qingqiu, and then he didn't move a mote.

After so long running every which way, Shen Qingqiu was also utterly exhausted. Unable to support the weight of two people, he slammed into the stone wall with a thud. Luo Binghe fell sideways into him, all limp, and his head cracked against the wall, letting out a loud thunk. Shen Qingqiu's heart clenched along with the noise, his gums aching in sympathy.

He rapidly got to his feet and put his arms around Luo Binghe, patting around until his hands reached Luo Binghe's back. The clothes across that back were ragged, corroded through by the corpse rain in the Hall of Sorrow. When Shen Qingqiu reached further, he found that the texture of the skin underneath that clothing was all wrong, as if rotting. It was already beginning to smell.

After all, there was nothing good about corpse rain.

When no one else was around, Shen Qingqiu’s preferred method of waking up other men was to give them two light slaps to the face. But before he’d even extended his hands, he figured he couldn’t bear to do it, so instead, he lightly patted Luo Binghe’s cheek, subconsciously also lowering his voice. “Luo Binghe? Luo Binghe?”

But Luo Binghe’s eyelids were so heavy that his lashes didn’t so much as tremble. In addition, his face was still flushed an abnormal red. When Shen Qingqiu reached up to touch it, both his forehead and cheeks were scalding hot, as if he had a fever.

However, Luo Binghe’s body shouldn’t even have known the concept of “fever.” Even if he occasionally ended up in dire straits, it never lasted long, nor would it get so bad that he lost consciousness. When Shen Qingqiu reached down to touch Luo Binghe’s hands: they were ice-cold. It was like his head was in a furnace while the rest of his body was in a freezer.

Shen Qingqiu put one hand on the back of Luo Binghe’s head, rubbing the place where it had crashed into the wall. “Binghe, can you hear me?”

No response.

Shen Qingqiu counted up the causes: In order to protect Shen Qingqiu’s body and prevent it from withering, Luo Binghe had exhausted several days’ worth of spiritual energy, but in the end, he’d still failed. Then he’d gone around catching all those Black Moon Rhinoceros-Pythons. After that, he’d come to the Holy Mausoleum, Tianlang-Jun had beaten him up, and he’d been assaulted by the sound attack in the Hall of Delight. Then Tianlang-Jun had continued beating him up, and finally, he’d been soaked in corpse rain.

No matter how you looked at it, this was much more serious than a fever.

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Chapter 16:
Melting Ice

AFTER LUO BINGHE PASSED OUT, his presence lost its suppressive effect, and the blind corpses that had retreated into the shadows began to stir again, coming to surround them as hissing groans escaped their throats.

Shen Qingqiu held Luo Binghe's limp body with one hand and Xiu Ya with the other. With a whip of his arm, the sword flew from its sheath like an arrow and stabbed through a dozen corpses on its first sweep. However, the snow-bright blade caught light very well, and when the green glow of the last-breath candles reflected off the sword, its glint grew even more piercing. Between the blind corpses' hypersensitivity to light and their quick dodges, this trick wouldn't work a second time. Right after Shen Qingqiu returned the sword to the sheath at his waist, several withered hands reached for him, and one even went for Luo Binghe's eyes. Shen Qingqiu swept out with a spiritual blast, bursting that unruly blind corpse's head into confetti.

But though spiritual blasts were an effective maneuver, one couldn't rely on them exclusively. They expended too much spiritual energy, and before long, your stores would run dry. In addition, Shen Qingqiu had returned to his original state where he had "two bars of battery"; he couldn't be as unrestrained as with his Dew Mushroom form. After releasing twenty or so attacks, he felt himself waning slightly. The blind corpses jostled back and forth in the corridor, and he could only kick them away one by one. Though these monsters were low level, they never stopped coming, and he was holding a woozy Luo Binghe. As he was sent staggering, his grip slipped for a moment, and Luo Binghe's head crashed into the stone wall again.

That thunk sounded especially painful. Shen Qingqiu guiltily cradled the back of Luo Binghe's head in his hand. Touching it again and again, he kept feeling like a giant lump had begun to swell there. *First a fever and now a bump—let's not give this child brain damage, okay?!*

Weak mobs were still troublesome, and staying in this tomb corridor full of last-breath candles would only attract endless waves of blind corpses. Shen Qingqiu changed positions and hauled an arm of Luo Binghe's over his shoulder, then bolted away, dragging him along like a comet trailing its tail. He left the blind corpses several meters behind, but his harried breaths made the last-breath candles light up one after another, cloaking them in an inescapable glow. Though the blind corpses couldn't catch up, he couldn't lose them either, and they were dogged in their pursuit—until Shen Qingqiu passed a small chamber as he turned a corner.

This might have been a preparation chamber. Coffins were scattered throughout the room in disarray, and the lids of some had even been overturned onto the floor. The resulting atmosphere was neither serious nor solemn. Shen Qingqiu quickly dragged Luo Binghe inside, checking the coffins one by one. Some contained withered corpses lying in strange positions, but some were empty.

The hissing outside the chamber grew closer and closer, and long wavering shadows weaved wildly on the floor. As the situation was getting dangerous, Shen Qingqiu leapt into a stone coffin. He had wanted to stuff Luo Binghe into another one, but there was no time. They tumbled into the same casket, entangled together.

Even though a layer of soft material padded the bottom, when Shen Qingqiu slammed down inside, stars filled his vision. Luo Binghe was on top, and Shen Qingqiu was on the bottom, so he was smushed under a considerable weight and almost unable to draw another breath.

What had this child been eating?! He looked quite slim, so how was he this heavy?!

Furthermore, the lid of the coffin was only shut halfway. Shen Qingqiu was about to reach out to close it when the green light outside flickered, and several stooped black shadows appeared on the ceiling.

The blind corpses had come inside.

They shuffled into the preparation chamber, making the occasional quiet tap against the furnishings, as well as rasping their sharp fingernails on the stone coffins. The result was bloodcurdlingly eerie.

If there was any place that was definitely without last-breath candles, it was the coffin interiors. As long as no light source appeared, those blind fools would be unable to catch them.

Shen Qingqiu stayed calm and lay there, facing up. Luo Binghe was on top of him, facing down, his head buried in the crook of Shen Qingqiu's shoulder, an uncomfortable heat against his neck. If even Shen Qingqiu was uncomfortable, Luo Binghe had to be even more so.

Luo Binghe's hands were freezing while his head was hot, so Shen Qingqiu figured he might as well use Luo Binghe's hands to cool his forehead. While he thought this was a good idea, just as he was about to grab Luo Binghe's wrist, his entire body froze.

Five bone-thin fingers with long claw-like fingernails appeared above the coffin.

Why was their search so meticulous?! Wasn't the IQ of blind corpses supposed to be super low?! Didn't these things entirely ignore anything that didn't give off light?!

Shen Qingqiu suddenly realized that next to his cheek, something really was giving off a dim red glow. When he looked, though Luo Binghe's eyes were closed, the heavenly demon mark of sin had appeared on his forehead, lines of crimson pulsing along with his breaths. The red glow flickered on and off along with it.

Though Shen Qingqiu knew this mark of sin was the manifestation of the bloodline's fall from the heavens, he didn't think it needed to be so bright, did it?! Why did it look like that thing on Ultraman's chest that flashed on and off whenever he was at the end of a fight and nearly out of battery?!

Shen Qingqiu couldn't spare a hand to cover that damnable mark, so before he could even think, he turned his head and pressed the side of his mouth against that smooth forehead. It looked a bit like he was kissing Luo Binghe's brow. *But don't mind the details—there are extenuating circumstances! Survival comes first!*

That spindly hand entangled a few strands of hair, its fingernails clogged with muck, and reached tremblingly into the stone coffin to grope all around. The casket was narrow but deep, and as long as it only felt around within the upper range, it wouldn't touch the two people lying inside.

But this hand had absolutely no sense of restraint. As it reached deeper and deeper, Shen Qingqiu's heart rose higher and higher in his throat. Just as it was about to touch Luo Binghe's spine,Shen Qingqiu gritted his teeth, extracted his right arm—which was going numb from the weight—and found a mostly intact place on Luo Binghe's back to pull him farther down.

Now Luo Binghe's whole upper torso was entirely pressed to his. There had been a gap between them before, but now they had become practically interlocked, chest to chest, abdomen to abdomen.

A person's abdomen is supposed to be the softest spot on their body, but Luo Binghe's was uncomfortably hard against Shen Qingqiu's stomach. The farther down he pulled him, the more he was sure that Luo Binghe had an eight-pack. Was that a rock slab down there?

Though the hand stopped searching down just barely before it reached Luo Binghe's back, it changed directions instead and started groping in the other direction. As it was about to touch Luo Binghe's calves, Shen Qingqiu steeled himself and spread his legs, letting Luo Binghe's left leg fall between the two of his.

He had already minimized the space the two of them took up as much as he could—he really couldn't make them any smaller!

That blind corpse's trembling hand continued to feel about for a while. Finding nothing at all, it slowly withdrew.

Only after all the blind corpses left the preparation chamber with dissatisfied rumbles, milling off into the distance, did Shen Qingqiu let out a sigh of relief.

Their current position was entirely too improper. If someone looked inside the coffin at that moment, they'd definitely think Shen Qingqiu was in the throes of lust, clinging to Luo Binghe and refusing to let go, pulling him into his arms as if he wanted to meld their bodies together. He was about to push Luo Binghe into a sitting position when a voice suddenly spoke in the preparation chamber.

“It’s far too early to relax.”

The voice was aged and had a mocking tone. Shen Qingqiu immediately grabbed Xiu Ya and flipped himself over, protecting Luo Binghe beneath him as he sat up on full alert, brandishing his sword. “Who is it?!”

The horde of blind corpses had left. This mausoleum chamber was completely empty of anything except the frigid stone coffins filling the room.

Don’t tell me another corpse woke up from one of these. I looked through everything, and pretty much all of them were dry goods!

That voice spoke again. “If this elder wanted to go unseen, even if you searched the entirety of the Holy Mausoleum, you wouldn’t find him.”

Only after these few words did Shen Qingqiu realize that the voice was eminently familiar; he had definitely heard it somewhere before, and more than once. In a sudden flash of realization, he returned his sword to its sheath. “Since it’s Senior Meng Mo, there’s no need to act so cryptic.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, an old man appeared in the center of the preparation chamber. He wore opulent robes, and his gaze was as sharp as a hawk’s. He sat crossed-legged on one of the coffins, arrogantly looking down at Shen Qingqiu. “So you remember this elder.”

“If Senior Meng Mo has appeared before me, then I must be dreaming,” Shen Qingqiu said.

Before, Meng Mo had only appeared in dream realms in the form of a cloud of black fog, but now he could manifest a human form. It looked like he had recovered quite well in Luo Binghe’s body. But seeing that the newcomer was the Portable Grandfather who was always on Luo Binghe’s side, Shen Qingqiu relaxed.

Meng Mo humphed. “But your current predicament is in no way a dream.”

“Could I ask for Senior Meng Mo’s assistance in entering Luo Binghe’s dream realm to wake him?” Shen Qingqiu asked.

"I can't wake him."

"Ah?" Shen Qingqiu began to panic, nearly breaking character. "Why not?!" Had the fever already damaged Luo Binghe's brain?

"I can't get in," Meng Mo said mildly. "Right now, this brat's spirit is in complete chaos, a field of nothingness filled with fog; he's sunk into a dream from which he cannot wake. This elder has only seen such circumstances within the dream realms of two kinds of people, one of which is the fatally ill who are close to death."

None of that sounded like it was anything good, but if the former was the fatally ill on the verge of death, the latter couldn't be worse, right?

"And the other?" Shen Qingqiu patiently asked.

"The mentally infirm."

Shen Qingqiu said a lot of nothing.

"The brat brought it on himself," Meng Mo continued as if speaking to himself. "In the past five years, he wore himself down performing soul-summoning rituals by day while massacring his own dream realm creations by night. This elder told him at the start that this was no different from destroying his own spirit, but he ignored that advice. This day was coming sooner or later. In the past few days, he exhausted his spiritual energy to preserve that Dew Mushroom body of yours, and that demonic sword took the opportunity to revolt. Then he barged into the Holy Mausoleum and went toe to toe with the most talented heir to the heavenly demon bloodline in the history of our race."

Shen Qingqiu gripped Xiu Ya so hard, his hand started to hurt. He looked back at Luo Binghe, lying dead to the world in the stone coffin, and asked, "Senior truly has no way to wake him?"

"I'm powerless to help."

Shen Qingqiu cupped his hands in a bow and silently lay back down in the coffin.

Meng Mo raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

"Sleeping. Until I wake up."

Blue veins popped on Meng Mo’s forehead. “You dare ignore this elder?”

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes. “Since Senior said he was powerless to help, then I can only wait until I wake up and get him out of here myself.”

Meng Mo humphed. “Our race’s Holy Mausoleum is forbidden territory, full of dangers, and there are two troublesome characters lying in wait. You can’t protect him alone.”

His words were correct. Very correct.

Shen Qingqiu opened his eyes again and sighed. “But in this moment, other than I, his master, who else can protect him? Or to put it another way, who else *would* protect him?”

Countless feelings ran through Shen Qingqiu in an endless onslaught, and his emotions were a mess, but he was very clear on one thing: no matter what, he couldn’t let Luo Binghe die here.

“After so many years, you’re finally willing to admit this brat is your disciple, and you are his shizun?” Meng Mo said in a cold voice.

“It’s certainly been a long time,” Shen Qingqiu said.

He was waiting for Meng Mo to continue with snide mockery, but instead, the old man suddenly sighed. “If this brat could wake up and hear these words of yours, who knows how overjoyed he’d be?”

Gramps, could you not make your every word so inauspicious?!

Shen Qingqiu’s face darkened with dismay. What did Meng Mo mean “if” Luo Binghe “could wake up”? This tone, like the one in question was on the brink of life and death, was only giving Shen Qingqiu even more anxiety, okay?!

Meng Mo was suddenly overcome with rage. “I’m clearly this kid’s shifu—just how much have I taught him, ah?!” he shouted. “Power to overturn the heavens, techniques to manipulate every heart! Yet he refuses to call me ‘Shifu.’ ‘Senior’ this, ‘Senior’ that! You, a common cultivator, merely taught him a few superficial forms and half-baked techniques, but he chases after you, crying and yelling and calling you Shizun! It drives me up the wall!”

This mass of rage had been building in Meng Mo's belly for a while, and the sight of these two lying in the same coffin was even more irritating to his eyes. He was going to go blind! He was extremely unhappy, supremely grouchy.

Shen Qingqiu wasn't happy either. He was already upset at the suggestion that Cang Qiong Mountain's sword techniques were "superficial," and he was just about to retort when Meng Mo exploded again, pacing back and forth on the coffin with his hands behind his back.

"If only I had seamlessly gotten rid of you in the dream realm back then, these complications wouldn't have arisen today. This brat was a moldable talent with incredible potential, but as soon as he met you, he turned into this maddening good-for-nothing, and he still pretends at it when you're around, trying to act all aloof! The way this elder sees it, he should either kill you or do you. Making such a fuss, will-he-won't-he—it's infuriating even to watch!"

Shen Qingqiu really wished he could cover his ears, or perhaps stitch Meng Mo's mouth shut. He shot a glance at Luo Binghe's quietly sleeping visage, the image of his disciple's crying face flashing through his head for a moment before he immediately looked away. "Senior, aren't these words a bit inappropriate to say to my face?!" he snapped, unable to bear it. "Are you done? If you're done, can you let me wake up?"

Meng Mo was still angry. "Wake up? You wouldn't know how to get out even if you did wake up. The entrance he opened has already closed."

"It might be possible to open it again," Shen Qingqiu said. "Senior, please tell me which direction I should head in to find the place where Luo Binghe broke through the barrier using the Black Moon Rhinoceros-Pythons."

His gaze landed on Xin Mo, which hung at Luo Binghe's waist. The place where he had broken into the mausoleum would still be weak, and if it were slashed once more with Xin Mo's dimension-rending abilities, it might open again.

Meng Mo looked in the direction of his gaze and understood his intentions, but remained skeptical. "That sword may not allow you to use it."

Of course, Shen Qingqiu knew that as well. He gritted his teeth. “There’s no other choice,” he said gravely to himself. “I have to try.”

When he woke, he was still lying in the stone coffin, and Luo Binghe was lying on top of him where Shen Qingqiu had left him, held tightly in his embrace.

Thank the heavens, that bothersome old gremlin Meng Mo had finally been willing to release him. Shen Qingqiu was about to sit up when suddenly his right leg seemed to brush something stiff that jabbed into the inside of his thigh.

At first, Shen Qingqiu thought it was his sword hilt, and he absentmindedly reached down to move it. But as soon as he touched the object, the System suddenly exploded with messages:

YOOOOOOO~~~ Protagonist satisfaction points +1,000! ┏(┏ ^q^)┓~~~ Congratulations on unlocking the achievement “Physical Relationship Advancement”!

At that moment, Shen Qingqiu also stiffened into a dried husk.

The hell did “Physical Relationship Advancement” mean?

Then he looked down. This “sword hilt” was in fact something quite impressive.

The heavenly pillar! It was the *heavenly pillar*, ahhh!

Shen Qingqiu was going to kill everyone in this room and then himself!

After flailing about for a while, he slapped himself across the face and reasoned with himself logically: One couldn’t tell day from night in the Holy Mausoleum, so maybe it was morning outside right now? Therefore, this was a natural phenomenon, a normal bodily function.

It would go away on its own, right? That was how it usually went, yes, that’s right!

But just letting it sit there and not doing anything about it—wasn’t that a bit pitiful?!

Well, there was nothing to be done about that. He couldn’t exactly help Luo Binghe jerk off under these circumstances, right?!

If he just pretended he hadn't seen anything, he would probably be forgiven—right?!

Right! In the end, as a shizun, Shen Qingqiu had absolutely no duty to help his disciple simmer down, even if he'd started the fire in the first place!

Shen Qingqiu shoved Luo Binghe off of him, slapped a palm against his chest, and sent a few waves of spiritual energy into him. Though it was pitifully meager, he had no more to give, and whatever he could summon was the sum total. As for everything else—

Just ignore it, ignore it!

After getting out of the coffin, he pulled and tugged, dragging Luo Binghe toward the "far east end," as Meng Mo had instructed. As his journey stretched on, the walls of the corridor began to dampen, and the floor beneath them grew slippery, covered in green moss. It became harder and harder to find steady footing, and Shen Qingqiu slowed his pace so he wouldn't slip.

As he continued, the moss gave way to more vegetation; wild grasses and thickets of flowers began to emerge too. The corridor gradually widened, and trees of varying heights rose from the ground. The floor was no longer only wet but also snaked with the twisted roots of old trees, causing Shen Qingqiu to trip from time to time. Flying insects swooped past and birdcalls echoed. The blue-black ceiling suddenly soared, and the white crystals embedded in it twinkled, looking like a veil of stars in the night sky.

Though it gave the impression that they were in a forest, in truth they hadn't left the Holy Mausoleum. They had just entered a special tomb within it.

Every tomb in the Holy Mausoleum had been personally designed by some demon noble of a past generation while they were still alive. The result was that it was home to all sorts of wonders, numbering in the thousands. It was just like an apartment building—when folks moved in, everyone got the same base suite, and anything else was the product of the residents renovating and decorating in accordance with their preferences. The mechanically skilled preferred their tricks and divination devices, those familiar with demonic beasts raised monstrous tomb guardians, and those gifted in herbology cultivated poisonous flowers and rare grasses.

The owner of this tomb was clearly the last type. Though these plants appeared ordinary and common to the eye, Shen Qingqiu definitely didn’t want to touch them. He removed his outer robe and draped it over both his head and Luo Binghe’s, tightened his arm around Luo Binghe’s waist, and carefully walked onward.

The grass rustled.

A frosty beam of white light shot at them through the air, along with the sharp sound of something breaking.

Shen Qingqiu snapped the fingers of his left hand, and Xiu Ya shot from where it was sheathed at his waist, crossing blades to divert the sneak attack with a clang, but in the end, this reduced neither opponent’s momentum even a bit.

Before Shen Qingqiu had finished dealing with this trouble, a second arc of white light arrived. This one went straight for Luo Binghe’s throat. Xiu Ya had blocked the first sword and Shen Qingqiu couldn’t summon it back, nor could he throw Luo Binghe aside. If he touched those plants, it was all over!

In a moment of desperation, Shen Qingqiu twisted slightly, raised his arm, and caught the swordpoint in his bare hand.

The blade tore open his palm but was caught solidly in his grasp and advanced not an inch further. His blood didn’t drip down so much as it poured. Half of Shen Qingqiu’s clothes and the jade-green grass on the ground were instantly coated with a layer of crimson.

Now he finally knew exactly how much it must have hurt for Luo Binghe, when he had grabbed Shen Qingqiu’s blade with his bare hand in Jin Lan City.

Blood-colored light dyed Shen Qingqiu’s eyes red. His head snapped up, and his pupils contracted.

He never would have guessed that these two were the “strays” Tianlang-Jun had mentioned.

A pair of figures walked out from behind a gnarled and sturdy old tree. Or to be more accurate, only one of them walked. The other was pushed on a little cart, something like a wheelchair.

The standing individual was a beautiful woman, her waist slender and figure curvaceous. Though the person being pushed sat on a wheeled chair and their entire body below the neck was swaddled in a thick blanket, Shen Qingqiu was quite familiar with the face that was still exposed.

That flying sword continued to push forward. Its force left Shen Qingqiu with no choice but to hold the blade tight, even as it was about to cut half his hand right off. But the expression on his face remained unwavering. "Miss Qiu, Old Palace Master," he said with a fake smile. "I hope you've been well."

Qiu Haitang's gaze filled with rage. The Old Palace Master's head jerked, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse. "Does Peak Lord Shen think I look 'well'?"

"I hope you've been well" was just a common greeting; it usually didn't mean anything. Shen Qingqiu forced out a laugh.

When he looked closer, he discovered that the word "well" really was a great mockery when deployed in this case. Before, the Old Palace Master had been like unto an ascended immortal. At both their first meeting at the Immortal Alliance Conference and their unhappy parting in Jin Lan City, his outer appearance and bearing had been pristine. But the current Old Palace Master's typically immaculate snow-white beard was filthy and matted, and his visage looked as ancient as if he'd taken a trip through the underworld; the wrinkles on his face were packed even thicker than the gnarled bark of the ancient tree behind him.

The Old Palace Master's voice was grim. "You must be very curious as to how I ended up in this state."

Shen Qingqiu thought to himself, *Can I just say I'm not curious? Then will you let me pass?* But when he spoke, he said, "This humble one heard the Old Palace Master went away into traveling seclusion."

The Old Palace Master chuckled. "Traveling seclusion? And you really believed that? In all of Huan Hua Palace, in all the cultivation world, how many people actually believe that? If you want to know the true state of affairs, you'd have to ask your darling disciple."

Though Shen Qingqiu didn't know exactly what had happened, it looked like the Old Palace Master was here to get even with Luo Binghe. Keeping his expression steady, Shen Qingqiu tucked Luo Binghe behind himself, shielding him as much as possible.

Qiu Haitang spat out, "Shen Jiu, I said it long ago—I wouldn't mistake you even if you burned to ash. I knew your self-detonation in Hua Yue City must have been some sort of trick. Dying to atone for your crimes? Hah, as if you're that sort of person! I saw through you on first sight in that demon vixen's territory. So you didn't die after all!"

You recognized only my physical body and not my soul. What use is that? Shen Qingqiu had nothing to say.

The day Shen Qingqiu was caught in Sha Hualing's Chi Yun Cave, he had seen Qiu Haitang only briefly while saving the cultivators of various sects, and this had, it seemed, aroused her suspicions, enough for her to keep an eye out from then on. He feared that as soon as he had returned to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect and was taken away by Luo Binghe, Qiu Haitang had crossed the borderlands and followed them all the way to the Demon Realm. When Luo Binghe was capturing a herd of Black Moon Rhinoceros-Pythons to break through the Holy Mausoleum's barrier, he must have been wearing himself to the point of exhaustion, his mind scattered, with no attention to spare for keeping up his guard, and he therefore hadn't noticed the people sneaking in after him. To summarize: you really couldn't underestimate a woman's grudge.

But Shen Qingqiu had genuinely never anticipated this team-up. Nor did he know when Qiu Haitang had come into contact with the Old Palace Master.

Although when Shen Qingqiu thought to question the timing, he had a sudden epiphany. "Did the Old Palace Master play a part in Miss Qiu's surprise appearance in Jin Lan City?"

Since Zhuzhi-Lang had denied that her arrival was his doing, someone else must have been fanning the flames as well. How else could Qiu Haitang have had the chance to show her face on the front lines with her measly little sect?

The Old Palace Master let out a cold laugh, giving neither an answer nor a denial.

A few tiny tufts of white fluff, like dandelion seeds, drifted past Shen Qingqiu’s field of vision, swirling through the air. He said, “This humble Shen does not believe he ever offended the Old Palace Master…”

“As events have progressed this far, there are no further secrets I must keep to myself,” said the Old Palace Master. His voice was faintly hoarse, as if a lump of phlegm blocked his throat. “When Luo Binghe joined my Huan Hua Palace, I took care to mentor him and intended to endorse him, but he refused to take me as his master, nor would he marry my daughter. Instead, he just wouldn’t let go of you. Of course I had to thoroughly investigate Peak Lord Shen to see what sort of extraordinary person you were. But I never expected that instead, I would unearth your numerous old affairs. I know your details and background in and out. Who you took as your master, what you did under him, exactly how you became a disciple of Cang Qiong Mountain—what a colorful tale! Even without the drama with the sower, you would surely have been sent to the Water Prison. But who could have expected that fate had other plans, and I needn’t have gone to the trouble?”

So the Huan Hua Palace disciples’ horrible attitude toward Shen Qingqiu in Jin Lan City hadn’t been because of Luo Binghe’s manipulations but the Old Palace Master’s intentional influence. Shen Qingqiu couldn’t resist taking another look at Luo Binghe. If only this child had been more adaptable with his thinking and taken another master, so many problems could have been avoided. But Shen Qingqiu could never resent him for his bullheaded persistence.

He could only sigh. “The Old Palace Master has looked upon my disciple highly. Yet the Palace Master’s two sword strikes were clearly directed at him; your words and actions do not seem to align.”

“Back then was back then. Now things are not as they were,” said the Old Palace Master. “Peak Lord Shen, please step aside. I do not care what happens to you, I just want this boy to pay for what he’s done.”

“If I step aside, the Palace Master will kill only him and leave me be?”

Qiu Haitang let out a cold laugh. “He’ll leave you be, but I’m still here!”

Her fighting abilities were far inferior to his, and she should have been of no consequence. However, in these circumstances, she presented quite a bit of trouble.

“That brute turned his back on his benefactors and left me in this state,” said the Old Palace Master. “I won’t rest until I kill him myself.”

“If he really turned his back on his benefactors,” Shen Qingqiu said, “he wouldn’t have spared your life, or that of your daughter. Grass ought to be pulled up by the roots; he understands this better than even you or me.”

Shen Qingqiu had never in a thousand years thought that one day he would argue on Luo Binghe’s behalf. When he heard those words, the Old Palace Master squawked a cackle. Qiu Haitang tore the blanket from his body. For a few seconds, Shen Qingqiu stopped breathing.

Below the blanket, only a uniformly rectangular torso remained. All four limbs were gone. The Old Palace Master had been carved into a human stick.

The master of a sect was now nestled in a broken-down little cart, filthy and barely human, left with only a head that could turn on its neck. The downfall of the original Shen Qingqiu had been transferred to the Old Palace Master.

Now *this* was worth holding a grudge over. It wasn’t something that could be solved with a few words of persuasion, some chicken soup for the soul, or an appeal to Buddhist compassion!

The Old Palace Master let out a cold laugh. “It was all your darling disciple’s doing. You see? I wish he *had* pulled up the grass by its roots.”

Shen Qingqiu fully agreed. Why hadn’t he pulled up this grass by its roots?!

Of these two strays, one wanted to kill Luo Binghe and one wanted to kill Shen Qingqiu. Qiu Haitang’s cultivation was insufficiently powerful, so she had needed someone’s assistance; the Old Palace Master was much stronger than her, but he was down on his luck. A starved camel was still larger than a horse, and the old man had once been the leader of a sect.

Even though he had lost his limbs and was unable to move freely, his spiritual energy hadn't weakened. This was what they meant with the sayings, "Men and women complete and complement each other," or "The blind carrying the lame."

Shen Qingqiu snapped the sword blade with his bare hands and tossed it into a nearby brush, his stare fixed on the two people poised to attack.

In truth, he could make a bet.

Even if Luo Binghe's OP abilities were useless against a character like Tianlang-Jun, whose data wasn't pulled from the original work, the Old Palace Master was a character grounded within the bounds of the original story. The protagonist's plot armor probably had yet to lose its effect against him. Shen Qingqiu could likely just step back and leave Luo Binghe to his own devices, just like how he had screwed over Die-er the Skinner Demon in the Shuang Hu City plotline. He could let the Old Palace Master hack at Luo Binghe and see who, in the end, would finish off whom.

The Old Palace Master said leisurely, "I'll ask again: Will you step aside or not?"

Shen Qingqiu lowered his arm. The blood that had slowed its steady flow from his palm began to drip once more. "The Old Palace Master said himself that he's my darling disciple," he said in an even tone as he lifted his head. "Tell me, do you think I'd step aside?"

There was nothing for it; now was not the same as then.

No matter what, Shen Qingqiu couldn't convince himself to use the protagonist's plot armor, to coldly stand aside and let someone else hack at Luo Binghe, to bet on whether he would live or die.

If, at this point, he could still use Luo Binghe and put him in danger like that with a clear conscience, he really would be like the scum villain of the original novel!

The Old Palace Master's eyes suddenly bulged, and several shouts exploded from his mouth.

He had lost his limbs, so he poured his spiritual energy into his voice, using this to attack. With every shout, a powerful spiritual flow swept over

Shen Qingqiu like an onslaught of blades, the power of the voice no less than that of a spiritual blast. Grass and foliage thrashed back and forth, leaves flying from trees. Shen Qingqiu used his still-bleeding right hand to block a few waves with the sheath of his sword. The tremors caused the wound to explode with agony, but he couldn't switch hands—if he didn't keep holding Luo Binghe in his left arm, he was afraid he'd drop him!

Even though the Old Palace Master had been carved into a human stick, his spiritual energy hadn't weakened in the slightest. No wonder Qiu Haitang had chosen to rely on him. As Shen Qingqiu thought this, the Old Palace Master suddenly let out a howl. A light cracking sound came from Xiu Ya's sheath, and Shen Qingqiu failed to block the assault. Overcome, Shen Qingqiu toppled backward. As he fell, he turned and used his own body to cushion the fall, not letting Luo Binghe land on the ground, and for his efforts was yet again crushed to the point he saw stars.

The Old Palace Master finally stopped howling, and Qiu Haitang slowly pushed him closer. He caught his breath for a while, then looked down at Shen Qingqiu, who still held Luo Binghe. "You really do protect him a great deal."

Qiu Haitang clenched her teeth. "Fake. It's all fake! This bastard… Who's he putting on a show for?!"

"Why not fight back with your spiritual energy?" the Old Palace Master asked.

"Because I've already run dry, of course," Shen Qingqiu replied.

Tuft after tuft of white fluff flew past, nearly alighting upon Luo Binghe's deathly pale cheek. Shen Qingqiu blew lightly, and they veered off and way.

The Old Palace Master thought Shen Qingqiu had accepted his fate, and so turned his attention away, his gaze instead landing on Luo Binghe's quietly sleeping face.

The hollering fury suddenly dropped clean away from the Old Palace Master's expression, replaced with a kind of enraptured look.

Shen Qingqiu held his tongue. Something…was very off about that gaze.

The Old Palace Master looked on for a while, bewitched, then sighed. “They look most alike when his eyes are closed. Or when his expression is cold.”

The Old Palace Master’s stare was palpable as it crawled up and down Luo Binghe’s face. If he still had hands, they definitely would have reached out to touch him by now. Shen Qingqiu’s stomach turned, and his arms moved unconsciously to pull Luo Binghe’s head further into his embrace.

Now Luo Binghe was resting intimately against his body, and even his head leaned upon Shen Qingqiu’s chest. Shen Qingqiu said severely, “Take a good look: this is not Su Xiyan.”

This name woke the Old Palace Master from his daze. “Why wouldn’t you listen to my orders?” he spat. “Why wouldn’t you just listen to me?! Was I not good to you? Didn’t you want Huan Hua Palace—didn’t you want my seat? I knew you wanted it, ever since you were young! If you just listened to me, what wouldn’t I have passed down to you? But one after the next, both of you ingrates spat on everything I gave you. Spat on *everything* I gave you!”

He snarled curses and raged, pouring every poisonous word in his vocabulary onto Tianlang-Jun and Shen Qingqiu, then roared about ingrates several dozen times in a row before his expression made an abrupt one-eighty, becoming gentle. He said in a parental tone, “Xiyan…come here…Shizun has something for you, drink up…”

The Old Palace Master had sunk in a trance, and saliva dripped from the corner of his lip as Qiu Haitang stepped back slightly, disgust evident on her face. Epiphany sparked through Shen Qingqiu, and his stomach turned even more intensely.

No wonder the Old Palace Master had always been so good to Luo Binghe, to an almost unsettling extent. No wonder that Su Xiyan, despite being his most beloved disciple, had held absolutely no attachment to Huan Hua Palace and had readily betrayed her sect to run off with a demon youth without ever looking back.

This “love” must not have been much different from molestation. And the Old Palace Master’s favorable interest in Luo Binghe was definitely founded in the shade of a former beloved disciple that the sect leader had seen in him. He had extended his perverse possessiveness of Su Xiyan to Luo Binghe, deluding himself into thinking he could groom Luo Binghe into an obedient darling child. But looking at him in this crazed state, Shen Qingqiu feared it wouldn't be anything so simple as making Luo Binghe his successor. Nor would "obedient" be relegated to the literal meaning of the word.

No wonder Luo Binghe had carved him into human swine.

Shen Qingqiu covered the back of Luo Binghe's head with one hand and pressed Luo Binghe's face into his own chest so the Old Palace Master couldn't keep fantasizing at him. This really was more than he could bear. "Have you had enough?!"

As soon as that visage was hidden from his sight, the Old Palace Master's face immediately collapsed, twitching as if his muscles were seizing, his gaze overflowing with hatred and resentment. He snapped open his mouth.

But no sound came from his throat. His eyes bulged, and his entire body seem to have frozen into a statue carved from stone.

Shen Qingqiu held his breath for a short moment. Gurgles came from the Old Palace Master's throat, and bloodshot veins crawled up the whites of his eyes.

But he couldn't move an inch.

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! It's finally here!

You really thought I was some dumbass Mother Teresa who wouldn't know to hit back when attacked?! You really thought carrying one person would weaken me to the point that I'd be incapable of slapping your cheek right back?!

Qiu Haitang was shocked. "What's happening?"

She made to draw her sword, but Shen Qingqiu cut in. "Miss Qiu, I'll offer you a word of advice: do not draw your sword, and do not rashly use your spiritual energy, if you don't want to share his fate."

Doubtful, Qiu Haitang circled around to the Old Palace Master's front, then let out a shrill scream.

Fleshy green protrusions had sprouted between the dense wrinkles on the Old Palace Master’s aged face. He seemed to be in such intense pain that not only could he not move, he couldn’t even speak.

Qiu Haitang’s voice trembled. “Shen Jiu… You… What have you done?”

“Nothing at all,” said Shen Qingqiu. “Don’t forget, this is someone else’s tomb. Did you think the demons would have failed to install protections?”

The tufts of white fluff floating in the air like dandelion seeds scattered in the wind were actually a type of demonic plant called “Ties That Bind.”

This plant sowed its seeds in the bodies of living beings, and they were especially attracted to people who gave off energy. Recklessly deploying one’s spiritual or demonic energy attracted these seeds to oneself. That was why Shen Qingqiu had stuck to physical combat as much as possible and avoided using his spiritual energy.

When Ties That Bind seeds entered one’s flesh, they didn’t hurt, only faintly itched. But once they sprouted from the flesh that was their soil and burst forth through the skin, every inch of rent flesh from which they grew erupted in violent agony. Furthermore, the more you used your spiritual energy, the faster they grew. If you went as far as to use a spiritual blast, they would sprout like mad, budding in an instant.

This whole time, the Old Palace Master had been attacking with his roars. His spiritual flow had been gathered in his head and throat, and now his face teemed with plump sprouts. The inside of his mouth and throat were certainly also stuffed full of the things. The sprouts’ short stalks were covered with thin fuzz and blood vessels, but the roots continued to stretch down beneath the skin, extending until they intertwined with his nerves.

Shen Qingqiu clicked his tongue. “Old Palace Master, you must not keep yelling and screaming. If the Ties That Bind proliferate and grow into your brain, there really will be no going back.”

This scene was both disgusting and horrifying. Qiu Haitang covered her mouth and trembled until she could finally bear it no longer. Her eyes rolled back into her head, and she fainted on the spot.

One couldn’t move an inch and one was unconscious. TPK!

Shen Qingqiu let out a sigh of relief. Holding Luo Binghe, he struggled to his feet.

Muscles tensed, the Old Palace Master slurred out, “Don’t celebrate too early; you’re no better.”

Merely saying those few words made his face twist in pain, the sprouts all over his face trembling along with his movement. Shen Qingqiu gave him an “ah” in response.

A deep, uncontrollable pain crawled up from his right arm to his shoulder.

When Shen Qingqiu blocked those two sword strikes, he had been forced to use spiritual energy, and now he was finally sprouting as well.

But that was fine… Luo Binghe was safe at last.

Seeing that Shen Qingqiu was going to leave, half carrying, half dragging Luo Binghe along with him, a cry escaped the Old Palace Master’s throat. In his urgency, he crashed out of the little cart, and his limbless body squirmed excruciatingly through the thicket of flowers and grasses covering the ground, scooting forward inch by inch, a terrifying yet pitiful sight.

“Don’t go…” the Old Palace Master muttered. “Don’t go… Don’t you go…”

Shen Qingqiu fled even faster. But he never expected that the Old Palace Master’s eyes would snap open and another roar would explode from his throat.

He was going to attack even at the cost of his own life!

Shen Qingqiu could no longer tell if the Old Palace Master was trying to keep them there or take Luo Binghe’s life. He barely managed to block again with his already cracking sheath. The vibration traveled down his right arm, stirring the bloody sprouts just beginning to emerge from it. Gut-wrenching agony tore through him, but he still didn’t let go of Luo Binghe. Bolstered by the extreme pain, his fighting spirit climbed, and he glared at the Old Palace Master, murderous intent raging in his eyes.

After that yell, quite a number of fleshy sprouts broke once more through the Old Palace Master's skin, some even growing from the corners of his eyes. He seemed unable to even feel pain at this point, and he cackled in fits of laughter, rolling around on the ground like a hunk of pork to Qiu Haitang's side. He yelled into her ear, "Aren't you going to kill Shen Qingqiu? He's right before your eyes, and you're asleep?! Get up, kill him! Kill them all!"

At this yell, Qiu Haitang gradually drifted awake to an old face, gnarled like a dried orange peel, inches from her own—one that was furthermore covered in strange growths, pocked densely with bloody holes—and was scared out of her wits on the spot. She screamed and screamed, drawing her sword and flailing it at empty air.

Afraid she would rashly call on her spiritual energy and draw the Ties That Bind seeds to herself as well, Shen Qingqiu called out, "Calm down!"

"Quick! Quick!" the Old Palace Master squawked. "Weren't you always begging for my help? They can't hold on much longer—do it now!"

Only when Qiu Haitang had Shen Qingqiu in her field of vision did she come back to her senses, just slightly. Her hands shook, and her eyes were blank.

To tell the truth, Shen Qingqiu didn't really hold a grudge against Qiu Haitang. She was a victim of the original flavor, after all. But if she insisted on blocking their way here, he would have to fight her.

But in defiance of all his expectations, Qiu Haitang didn't indiscriminately attack like before. She just stared blankly at Shen Qingqiu, then at Luo Binghe lying in his arms. Not only did she not advance, she even retreated a few steps.

"It's not possible… Not possible…" she said, her lips trembling. "It's fake! It's all fake! It wasn't my brother. My brother didn't do anything wrong—it couldn't have been him! You're lying!"

What's this?

"I didn't know," she sobbed and screamed. "I didn't know it was like that. I didn't do anything at all. So why did I have to suffer for so many years?!"

Shen Qingqiu was shocked. Qiu Haitang had been unconscious for only a brief moment. Why was she practically a different person upon waking? Or perhaps it was more like she had seen something she couldn’t accept and had been terrified into insanity.

Shen Qingqiu knew something was up. He said sternly, “Don’t thrash about.”

“What are you waiting for?!” the Old Palace Master yelled.

Qiu Haitang lost her mind and screamed at Shen Qingqiu, huddling with her arms over her head. “What exactly did you think of me? Did you hate me? Pity me? Want me to suffer a fate worse than death? Why didn’t you kill me? Why didn’t you kill me?!”

Shen Qingqiu was completely mystified.

Qiu Haitang turned and ran.

“Come back!” he called after her. “Randomly running around the Holy Mausoleum means certain death!”

But she had already fled, and he didn’t have the time to chase her. Shen Qingqiu experienced a strange sense of dejection or perhaps loss; he didn’t know exactly how he felt about this. After a while, he mentally lit a candle for Qiu Haitang, then continued on.

As Qiu Haitang had run off, and Shen Qingqiu was also walking away, the Old Palace Master lost his last thread of hope. He sprawled numbly on the ground, then suddenly dropped his head to chomp on a mouthful of grass and leaves.

He chewed and laughed, cackling and guffawing, as the fleshy sprouts on his face grew denser and denser, faster and faster, until they blanketed his entire head. Not long later, he could no longer laugh. Shen Qingqiu could almost hear the noise of his skull and brain being compressed.

The Old Palace Master’s breath came in rough pants before his head thudded heavily to the ground. He would never lift it again.

The leader of a sect dying in such a wretched and frightful manner—it really was cause for pity.

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Before Shen Qingqiu had gone very far, an indistinct voice sounded by his ear, as if it was coming from all directions at once. There was a smile in Tianlang-Jun's tone. "Peak Lord Shen has played such a spectacular game of hide-and-seek. Why don't we guess when we'll meet again?"

Shen Qingqiu rubbed his leg and found his hand covered in foreign matter. Cold sweat poured from his forehead. The Ties That Bind had already followed his blood vessels down to his leg.

Tianlang-Jun spoke through the voice-transmitting spell again. "By heading straight east, are you trying to escape the Holy Mausoleum through the tear in the barrier?"

The bastard even knew which way he was going. Shen Qingqiu kept his surprise to himself and looked down. Once the Ties that Bind on his leg fully took root, he wouldn't be able to walk even if he tried. He clenched his teeth and glanced at Luo Binghe. Steeling himself, he tore open his hem, grabbed a handful of bloody sprouts, and pulled.

His brain went blank for what could have been half a minute. A whole chunk of his flesh seemed to have been torn out.

Shen Qingqiu panted for breath. Only after slowly coming back to his senses did he discover that his breaths sounded very much like sobs.

He couldn't even wipe his face. He had no way to do so. It really… hurt too fucking much!

Though his blood was flowing in rivers, at least he could walk now. He had thought Luo Binghe was in a wretched state, but if anyone else saw him now, they'd find his condition one-hundred-and-twenty percent more wretched.

Tianlang-Jun knew their location, so he had to be rushing here already. If Shen Qingqiu kept going east with Luo Binghe, they'd definitely run headfirst into those two wonderful relatives of his. After leaving that primeval forest of a tomb hall, Shen Qingqiu passed another chamber. He rapidly went in and selected a relatively clean and comfortable stone coffin and, supporting Luo Binghe's head, carefully settled him inside. When he tested Luo Binghe's forehead with the back of his hand, it was still scalding hot, and the mark in the center of his forehead was growing even redder and brighter.

Shen Qingqiu placed Xin Mo beneath Luo Binghe's hand, calmed himself, then slowly closed the coffin.

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Tianlang-Jun strolled in front, Zhuzhi-Lang following close behind. After a turn in the corridor, they found Shen Qingqiu, Xiu Ya in hand, standing in the center of a mausoleum hall. He looked at them with a cool gaze, as if he had been waiting for a long time.

Half of his teal robes had been dyed scarlet, and fresh blood still dripped down his right hand along the dried traces of old gore. His lips were nearly as pale as his face.

Tianlang-Jun was shocked. "We were separated for a mere moment. How has Peak Lord Shen ended up in such a woeful state?"

Shen Qingqiu looked back at him. Tianlang-Jun had been swallowed by a flaming pillar of magma in the Hall of Fury, yet he didn't smell of so much as a single scorched sesame seed. At most, his black robes were a bit singed at the edges. What the hell kind of logic was that?

"Where is Peak Lord Shen's beloved disciple?" Tianlang-Jun asked.

"He left," said Shen Qingqiu.

Tianlang-Jun smiled. "Peak Lord Shen is still here. How could he have left?"

Shen Qingqiu smiled back. After this exchange of smiles, Tianlang-Jun suddenly found himself unable to continue doing so.

He had discovered that he couldn't take another step.

He looked down. At some point, he had been covered by a layer of super-hard crystal-clear ice from his feet to his waist, and the ice was still inching up his body. Zhuzhi-Lang's situation was a bit more severe—both his legs and one of his arms had already been frozen solid.

Only now did Tianlang-Jun notice that this mausoleum hall was extremely cold. He paused, then said, “The Mobei clan.”

This mausoleum hall had been constructed by Mobei-Jun’s grandfather. Their bloodline was adept at controlling ice; these powers were unrivaled among the demon race, with none their equal, so the power of this hall also revolved around ice magic.

The Holy Mausoleum was filled with settings and props for Shen Qingqiu’s use. He didn’t need to attack anyone with his own hands, there were plenty of things that could entrap his enemies. Shen Qingqiu had remembered that the original work said that whenever anything warmer than the air in this hall entered, it would be frozen on the spot, turned into an ice statue. After a couple of days, the ice statue would then shatter into shards. Before he came in, he had activated his spiritual meridians to lower his body temperature as far as it could go. That was why his face was so pale.

During this brief exchange, ice had already crept up to Tianlang-Jun’s chest. The expression on his face didn’t waver as demonic qi roiled in his hand, but it was unable to melt through the ice wrapped around his fist, so it came to little effect. Even if this ice couldn’t keep him frozen forever, it would delay him for at least an hour.

“So I genuinely wasn’t mistaken,” Tianlang-Jun said. “Peak Lord Shen knows my race’s forbidden mausoleum practically as well as the back of his hand.”

Without another word, Shen Qingqiu waved, and he was off in a swirl of robes.

Tianlang-Jun took a look at Zhuzhi-Lang and leisurely said, “I told you that if you were truly determined to bring Peak Lord Shen to the Demon Realm, you would have to guarantee that he wouldn’t cause trouble. You know what you have to do.”

“This subordinate understands,” Zhuzhi-Lang quietly responded.

Upon hearing this exchange, Shen Qingqiu suddenly felt as if he might have forgotten something very important.

Zhuzhi-Lang said, “Immortal Master Shen, my apologies.”

Don't! A thousand times don't! I ended up in this sorry state because you wanted to thank me—will I even be able to get out of this alive if you start apologizing?!

Just as these thoughts crossed his mind, Shen Qingqiu suddenly swayed even though he had been walking just fine, and he had to brace himself on the stone wall for support.

It felt like something was squirming and struggling, surging from his stomach to flood all the veins in his body. This sensation was both familiar and terrifying, and Shen Qingqiu nearly busted out a "motherfucker!" on the spot.

Luo Binghe was still sleeping in a coffin, so the stuff wreaking havoc in his body at this moment could only be someone else's blood.

"Peak Lord, this can't be the first time you've drunk heavenly demon's blood, how are you still not accustomed to it?" Tianlang-Jun asked.

Shen Qingqiu forced back the urge to retch. "When did you make me drink it…?"

"Peak Lord Shen, don't forget, your immortal body was in our hands for no short amount of time," Tianlang-Jun replied, his words quite suggestive and teasing both. "There's really *too* much we could have done."

No wonder they had determined where he was heading so easily. Shen Qingqiu paused, then continued walking. The more he walked, the sharper the pain in his stomach grew, but he kept going faster and didn't slow down—partly because his pain tolerance had grown, but more so because he knew he absolutely couldn't fall to his knees now. While these two were still frozen, he had the chance to escape. By the time they defrosted, it would be no easy task to stall them again!

Though he was clear about the pros and cons here, as he walked faster and faster and Zhuzhi-Lang spurred the blood into fiercer action, Shen Qingqiu couldn't resist turning to shoot a ferocious glare at him. He said he wanted to repay a kindness, so he was doing it by letting these blood mites nest, lay eggs, and enjoy a family reunion in Shen Qingqiu's stomach?!

"To be able to walk so far even in this state, Peak Lord Shen must have an iron will—truly an extraordinary person," Tianlang-Jun remarked. "Or should I say it's that you're willing to throw even your life away for my son?"

Suddenly, Zhuzhi-Lang said, "My Lord, I—this subordinate can't suppress it anymore."

Before he had finished speaking, Shen Qingqiu felt the pain suddenly dissolve and his entire body went light. He immediately broke into a run.

As he actually started running, Tianlang-Jun was quite surprised. "Can't your blood suppress him?"

Zhuzhi-Lang was greatly confused as well. "It could before. But for some reason, this time it can't!"

Shen Qingqiu's ears buzzed; he couldn't hear, and his sight was blurred, but knowing he still had to drag Luo Binghe to the entrance and toss him out, he supported himself against the wall and kept jogging. Tripping on something, his figure swayed. After forcing himself to hold on for so long, he was nearing his body's limits and on the verge of collapse. His knees immediately went soft. However, he didn't fall to the ground and found himself caught solidly by someone's arm, then was half supported, half lifted to his feet.

With his vision a blur and the world spinning around him, Shen Qingqiu's gaze focused upward. In the murky darkness of the stone corridor, it was impossible to see the person's face, but a pair of eyes burning with fury and a mark shining with scarlet light shone clearly through the gloom.

Tianlang-Jun and Zhuzhi-Lang were now frozen from head to toe, two ice sculptures coiled with dark qi standing in the center of the hall. After Luo Binghe strode into the hall, threads of ice-cold white qi crawled up his black boots, but he mercilessly stomped them to pieces. He slammed a palm into each of the ice sculptures, and cracks snaked along the surface of the solid ice.

"It's no use," Shen Qingqiu said, half leaning against the stone wall. "Crystallized ice isn't so easy to break after it's formed. And attacking it like that can't harm the ones inside. We might as well take advantage of this opportunity to escape the Holy Mausoleum while they're sealed."

Luo Binghe whipped around and walked toward Shen Qingqiu again.

When he had first seen Luo Binghe, Shen Qingqiu had been both surprised and happy. He had planned to go back to the coffin to fetch him, not expecting that he'd wake up himself. He was just about to ask how Luo Binghe was feeling when he realized that Luo Binghe seemed to be furious.

"Didn't I tell you not to associate with them?!" Luo Binghe snapped.

He spoke in nearly a roar. Shen Qingqiu was already dizzy, and now his eardrums ached at the volume of Luo Binghe's voice. It was like someone had thrown a basin of cold water in his face. After staring blankly for a moment, he suddenly felt an inexplicable flame of anger erupt within his heart. He said dryly, "Are you better now?"

"Better? Better how?" Luo Binghe's tone was still unkind.

If he was that full of vitality, he was probably fine. That being the case, Shen Qingqiu had managed to repay Luo Binghe at least a little bit. He nodded. "That's good." Then he turned, picked a random direction, and walked off.

Actually, he didn't know where he ought to go. If he wanted to leave the Holy Mausoleum, Xin Mo and Luo Binghe were both indispensable. Without either, he could only blindly wander around inside. But he'd staked his damn life to drag Luo Binghe all this way and just been yelled at for his troubles. Staying there to sulk would be pointless too.

Before he'd gotten very far, a last-breath candle on the side of the corridor blazed with light, and the dim candlelight illuminated one side of his face. Luo Binghe suddenly reached out and caught his arm. "Are you crying?"

Shen Qingqiu froze.

Was he crying?

Was he crying?!

Not possible!

Shen Qingqiu wiped at his cheek with his left hand. This perfectly uninjured hand had kept a firm hold on Luo Binghe the whole time; only now was it free to do other things. As soon as he touched his face, he realized that at some point, tears had indeed streamed down his cheeks.

Shen Qingqiu was abruptly aware that these were the tears of pain he had cried while pulling the Ties That Bind from his leg. How unsightly.

Luo Binghe's anger disappeared from his voice without a trace. "So earlier, when I heard the faint sounds of Shizun crying, that was real?" he asked, tone urgent.

"What crying?" Shen Qingqiu snapped, lashing out somewhat in embarrassment. "I don't know anything about that!"

He tried to walk right off again, but Luo Binghe hurriedly embraced him from behind—and just so managed to grab Shen Qingqiu's right arm where the Ties That Bind had taken root. Shen Qingqiu managed not to shriek, but he still let out a stifled groan. Luo Binghe immediately let go and led him over by the left hand to inspect him under the candlelight.

The more Luo Binghe looked, the more shocked he became. Practically no place on Shen Qingqiu's body was safe to look at. He was nothing but a heap of wounds and blood, truly a spectacle too horrible to behold. Luo Binghe remembered that before he had lost consciousness, Shen Qingqiu had clearly still been in perfect condition. His voice trembled. "This…was all for…me?"

Shen Qingqiu was going to spit blood. If not for Luo Binghe, then who?

He couldn't say that sort of thing. He always felt awkward making a big deal about what he'd done for someone else or showing off his scars, and he only managed to wrench out four words: "Your hand—let go."

Luo Binghe changed his expression in the blink of an eye and softened. "I won't. Shizun, don't be angry. I was wrong."

He's said that so many times!

Shen Qingqiu waved him aside. *Hurry up and go, go, go. The blind corpses are surrounding us already. Why are we still here, blocking the road?*

Having been waved off, Luo Binghe latched on to him again like sticky cowhide candy, impossible to pry off. “Shizun, why don’t you hit me? You can beat me up to vent your anger.”

Help, there’s a masochist over here! Someone come lock him up—

Shen Qingqiu flew down the corridor, and Luo Binghe stuck to him the whole way. He was most familiar with Luo Binghe’s act by now; Luo Binghe knew very well that he responded to sweetness rather than to threats. After a long while of being pestered and worn down, Shen Qingqiu said helplessly, “You’re always like this, crying and admitting your wrongs, but you never change. What’s the point?”

At this point, Luo Binghe was close to sobbing. “I’ll change, all right? Shizun, don’t abandon me.”

The sight of him acting like such a good-for-nothing was such that, if Shen Qingqiu hadn’t still been concerned about the bumps he had left on the back of Luo Binghe’s skull, he’d have been filled with the urge to give him a few smacks on the head. There was nothing wrong with his teaching methods, was there? How had he raised such a crybaby? What would everyone say if they knew the devil incarnate, Luo Binghe, liked to hang on to his Shizun’s sleeves and wail when no one else was around? Who’d fucking believe it?

Not even Ning Yingying cried this much!

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t take it anymore. “Who’s abandoning you? Huh?”

“After I lost consciousness, I still retained a shred of awareness. I was fighting with all my might to wake up,” Luo Binghe said. “But once I finally managed to wake, I found myself lying in a coffin, and Shizun had run off to who knew where. I snapped; I thought I’d been abandoned, and I thought Shizun would rather run off with those two than pay attention to me…”

Waking up to find yourself all alone, “abandoned” in a coffin—that certainly wouldn’t feel very good. Shen Qingqiu guiltily coughed.

“Just now, I didn’t do that on purpose,” Luo Binghe continued. “I don’t even know why I did it. I didn’t want to, and I didn’t want to say those things, but I can never control myself in front of Shizun. I know I’m being embarrassing and unsightly. But knowing that Shizun didn't abandon me, that he was protecting me all along, that I wasn't dreaming—I'm so happy…"

Exactly which of us is being embarrassing and unsightly here? Two grown men, entangled in a heap, wiping at tears and snot—we're both being embarrassing and unsightly, okay?!

Perhaps because he was too happy, Luo Binghe was now unable to utter any of his flowery vocabulary—he just kept repeating the words "happy" and "glad" over and over in those simple terms.

Shen Qingqiu's face twitched. Rubbing his temples, he let out a deep sigh. Whatever. It wasn't like this was the first time. Even Meng Mo had said that this kid was just like this, acting all Badass Darkened Demon Lord to your face, but who knew if he was wringing his handkerchief and crying behind your back? What use was it to hold that against him?

Getting back to the point, Shen Qingqiu himself had been ridiculous too. Getting upset over such a small misunderstanding—he was no better than this unfortunate lunatic child. How unlike a proper elder.

He caught his breath for a moment. "You're really all right now?"

Luo Binghe immediately nodded. "I'm all right."

He'd had such a high fever, and now he was perfectly fine? Shen Qingqiu was quite skeptical and pressed a hand to Luo Binghe's forehead, but he found it cool and smooth. He tried to take his hand away, but Luo Binghe covered it with his own, refusing to let him move, eyes shining below their folded palms.

This expression was too familiar. Wasn't this that good and upright youth, that bleating, grass-chewing little lamb who had followed Shen Qingqiu around every day on Qing Jing Peak, that small, refreshing sun of a Luo Binghe?

Shen Qingqiu's face was going to turn red under his stare, but he couldn't just tear his hand away. If he did that while Luo Binghe was all excited and overjoyed, how would that be any different from slapping him across the face?

"You're really completely fine?" Shen Qingqiu asked. "No dizziness? Your spiritual and demonic energy are circulating well?"

"Quite well," said Luo Binghe. "Very well. Even better than before."

As they spoke, they had reached a chamber on the east end of the mausoleum. Luo Binghe drew his sword and slashed, and a pitch-black spatial rift appeared in the screen wall.[2] His broken arm had mysteriously healed itself, he was no longer limping, the blood on his face had been wiped clean, and the ever-disobedient Xin Mo was docile in his hands. The protagonist was still the protagonist, as OP as ever. Shen Qingqiu didn't want to say another word. With a "Let's go, let's go" type of gesture, he led the way through the rift.

Outside the Holy Mausoleum, it was a bright and sunny day. Luo Binghe reached out to support Shen Qingqiu unprompted.

Come to think of it, it really had been a long time since they had such a normal interaction. As soon as Shen Qingqiu had this melancholy thought, he couldn't resist shooting a glance at Luo Binghe. Seeing him all upbeat and refreshed, it really did seem like he was "quite well." Funny how Shen Qingqiu had staked his sorry life to protect Luo Binghe, and all that trouble slid off him like water off a duck's back. Turned out all this time he spent snoozing away was to recharge his OP halo. (Shen Qingqiu waved goodbye to his own dignity.)

Luo Binghe suddenly said, "But other than hearing Shizun crying…"

Shen Qingqiu smiled faintly. "Hmm? Who was crying?"

Luo Binghe immediately changed his tone. "Other than hearing someone crying, I also had this strange feeling."

At this, Shen Qingqiu grew a bit worried again. So he really did have some lingering symptoms? He said quietly, "What sort of feeling?"

Luo Binghe shook his head. "I can't say."

"Did it hurt?"

"It didn't hurt. It was very…" Before he could finish, a confused expression crossed his face, and he looked down at his lower body.

Shen Qingqiu was silent.

Hello, heavenly pillar! Goodbye, heavenly pillar!

This conversation was halted before it could continue. Tianlang-Jun's voice drifted after them like a deceased soul refusing to disperse.

"Peak Lord Shen, why are you in such a hurry to leave? The two of you have all but overturned my race's sacred land. How can you just simply walk out like this without leaving anything behind?"

With every word, Tianlang-Jun's voice grew much closer. Before long, he appeared within sight. The Mobei clan's ice magic, which had clung to their tomb for millenia, had managed to delay Tianlang-Jun and Zhuzhi-Lang until Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe left the Holy Mausoleum; it had truly done a lot.

Luo Binghe was already displeased that he had been unable to simply shatter those two into ice shards earlier, and their choice to deliver themselves to him quite suited his wishes. His knuckles cracking, he glared at Zhuzhi-Lang, his voice taking on a dangerous tone. "You dared to feed my shizun your blood?"

As soon as Zhuzhi-Lang saw Shen Qingqiu, an abashed expression crossed his face.

Tianlang-Jun looked at Luo Binghe, then sighed. "You can't say those words with that sort of expression. Didn't you also feed Peak Lord Shen your blood? Or does the other set of blood mites in Peak Lord Shen's body belong to someone else?"

Upon hearing this, Luo Binghe froze, and his fists clenched tight. As soon as Shen Qingqiu began to lift the hand holding Xiu Ya, Luo Binghe immediately said quietly, "Shizun does not need to fight; I am enough on my own."

And they were off!

Three pillars of dark qi soared, churning into the sky like storm winds. Watching the battle as a spectator, Shen Qingqiu was even more deeply appreciative of how demons and humans were inarguably two different races.

The difference in destructive potential was really too profound!

And it looked like Luo Binghe had indeed just been recharging and upgrading his OP halo. A mere couple hours prior, he had been viciously beaten up, powerless to fight back, but now it looked like the protagonist halo was still solidly affixed to Luo Binghe's head after all!

As Shen Qingqiu watched, he noticed a scarlet bone eagle circling through the air, lowering its wings and looking for an opportunity to rush into the fray. As Luo Binghe fought one-on-two, it seemed he hadn't noticed this bone eagle that obviously harbored nefarious intentions, but Shen Qingqiu could see everything clearly. Just as he was about to call out a warning, that bone eagle swooped and dove at the top of Luo Binghe's head.

A sneak attack?

Shen Qingqiu held Xiu Ya in a reverse grip, took careful aim, and flung it at his target. The snow-white blade flew like an arrow, running the bone eagle through like a bolt of lightning. But before Shen Qingqiu could breathe a sigh of relief, he saw that the bone eagle's body didn't fall but scattered into thousands upon thousands of droplets, which surged toward him.

Tianlang-Jun suddenly drew back and hopped away from the battle with a laugh. As the blood droplets scattered through the air, a stricken expression flashed across Luo Binghe's face.

Shen Qingqiu immediately realized that Tianlang-Jun had solidified his own blood to create this bone eagle. He had sent the bone eagle to ambush Luo Binghe, but his true intent had been to draw Shen Qingqiu into attacking and shooting it down.

Just as Shen Qingqiu realized this, he received a downpour of bloody rain to the face. Tianlang-Jun smiled faintly. He raised his hand, then made a fist in midair. Shen Qingqiu immediately felt his heart clench, as if it were now in someone's palm, being kneaded and pinched maliciously.

There was just too much blood. Though he had shut his mouth tight, he still tasted a hint of rust on his tongue.

Who else guzzled heavenly demon blood like Red Bull? Who else had drunk the blood of three different heavenly demons?

Luo Binghe's eyes were red with panic, but Tianlang-Jun's blood was inside Shen Qingqiu's body, so he didn't dare do anything rash, afraid Tianlang-Jun would unleash the blood mites. He could only grit his teeth and yell, "Stop!"

Watching Shen Qingqiu's face go green and pale in turns, Zhuzhi-Lang couldn't resist speaking up. "My lord, show some mercy…"

Tianlang-Jun shrugged. "That depends on what our other young friend will do next."

Three sets of blood mites were tearing it up in Shen Qingqiu's insides, enmeshed in open warfare. Of them, Luo Binghe's blood was concentrating on protecting Shen Qingqiu's organs and meridians while it held a firm advantage over Zhuzhi-Lang's blood, but it had to struggle to a stalemate with Tianlang-Jun's blood at the same time. Fighting on both fronts, one-on-two, would inevitably leave him in a serious bind. Instead, the ones who could unleash themselves to the fullest extent were Tianlang-Jun's blood mites, because he had nothing to lose.

"You better think this through," Tianlang-Jun said to Luo Binghe. "If we continue like this, who will be the first to falter?"

The worry and helplessness in Luo Binghe's eyes grew greater and greater, but in the end, he conceded only so far as, "You stop first!"

Though an elder, Tianlang-Jun possessed absolutely no awareness of the concept of humoring his juniors. Instead, he said, "You first."

"Fine," Luo Binghe instantly replied.

Tianlang-Jun's smile was unreadable. "He truly is…" He turned to look at Zhuzhi-Lang. "What should I do? For some reason, when I look at them, I feel a bout of extreme displeasure."

Zhuzhi-Lang silently nodded.

Shen Qingqiu accepted his misfortune, but he didn't want to drag others down with him. All his life, the characters he hated most were those who got taken hostage; if someone wanted him to become the sort of weak character who held others back, they might as well just kill him.

He managed to keep this from showing on his face as he said, "This distinguished one can torment me however he wishes. As you said, after drinking it this many times, I ought to be used to it by now. But if you want Luo Binghe's body, don't even think about it. Luo Binghe, if you surrender to him, I'll crush my own skull."

"Shizun!" Luo Binghe yelled, furious and helpless.

"Shut your mouth," Shen Qingqiu snapped back.

"Who said I wanted his body?" Tianlang-Jun asked, mystified.

Shen Qingqiu was speechless.

"He's not as handsome as I am," Tianlang-Jun continued. "Why would I want his body?"

Shen Qingqiu had no words.

Who said you were more handsome than him?

Who gave you the license?

"Great Master" Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky personally confirmed that Luo Binghe is unparalleled throughout the ages, across the three realms and the heavens and earth, envied by men and admired by women, beloved by the young and old alike—that he's this novel's number one hotcake who could shock all of existence and make gods and ghosts alike sob over his beauty, okay?!

Shen Qingqiu's face grew dark with consternation. "Then what exactly do you want?"

"My lord wants that sword," Zhuzhi-Lang replied for him.

"That's right," Tianlang-Jun said. "I'm going to give the Human Realm a present, but I can't do it without that sword."

He wanted the protagonist's golden finger? Shen Qingqiu's internal monologue was filled with a barrage of "Ha ha!" "You wish!" "Who do you think you are?!" "You won't even know how you died!" and the like—

Only to see Luo Binghe raise his arm, then Zhuzhi-Lang raise his. In an instant, the exchange was complete. Swift and decisive, without a moment of hesitation!

"Hand him over!" said Luo Binghe.

Zhuzhi-Lang swiftly transformed into serpent form and snatched Shen Qingqiu up into his mouth. Tianlang-Jun leapt astride him and laughed out loud. “You really believed me? Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.”

This really was too shameless! Just like a grown adult making a pinky promise in order to con something out of a little kid’s hands, then turning around and refusing to follow through. Shen Qingqiu felt a sense of injustice on Luo Binghe’s behalf for this bullying and, even surrounded by Zhuzhi-Lang’s fangs, blurted out an accusation. “Don’t you know you’re his elder?”

“I only know that I am a demon,” Tianlang-Jun said in a gentlemanly tone from his perch atop Zhuzhi-Lang’s head. “Peak Lord Shen must have spent too long lingering among humans and forgotten that our race never cared for keeping our promises. Of course, most of the time, your kind only keeps up appearances as well.”

With those last few words, the smile faded from Tianlang-Jun’s lips. Shen Qingqiu’s vision went dark, and something bright-red and stinking hot enveloped him from all sides like a sack.

Zhuzhi-Lang had swallowed him.

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Chapter 17:
Tianlang

WHEN SHEN QINGQIU WOKE, the air was dry, and his throat itched.

He rolled into a sitting position. A young, dark-skinned demon girl was crouched next to him, and as soon as she saw him wake, she called outside in a thick accent, “He’s up!”

Tianlang-Jun lifted the curtain with one hand and poked his head in. He raised an eyebrow. “Peak Lord Shen has certainly been asleep for a long time.”

Expression wooden, Shen Qingqiu wiped his face and confirmed that no scent of an enormous slithering creature’s gastric liquids lingered on his body. The gauze curtains billowed in a dry wind, and he took in the scenery outside.

He lay atop a giant serpent with black scales. The serpent carried a splendid platform on its back as it steadily slithered along the ground. They were surrounded by a number of demons of all sizes in whole- or half-beast form, gathered into an army that was miscellaneous in make yet grand in scale. Currently, they were on the march.

Shen Qingqiu determined that this was likely the southern border territories of the Demon Realm.

The northern border was Mobei-Jun’s territory, and it now belonged to Luo Binghe. Humanoid demons were in the majority there, and they specialized in the magic arts. Demons with mixed or bestial forms were only common at the southern border, where they formed some sort of Animal Planet. Who could say where Tianlang-Jun was bringing all these demons, or what he was planning to do?

After Shen Qingqiu finished taking stock of his surroundings, he suddenly noticed that the right side of his chest, as well as that entire arm, still stung and tingled, and it moreover felt a bit lethargic.

He drew a deep breath, made all the adequate mental preparations, and looked down.

It looked even worse than he'd expected.

It was like a false limb of branches and leaves had been grafted onto him. A dense thicket of fleshy green sprouts and foliage covered his right arm, and they shivered with every move of his body, no matter how minute. His hand was numb, and he couldn't even curl his fingers.

After this single glance, he couldn't bring himself to look anymore. Xiu Ya was right by him; he really fucking wanted to take it and slice his arm clean off.

Then Zhuzhi-Lang popped up, holding a little metal furnace that emitted wisps of smoke. Shen Qingqiu reacted to the sight of this fellow as he would to the sight of a ghost. "What are you doing?" he demanded, alarmed.

Zhuzhi-Lang froze on the spot. "This one only wanted to help Immortal Master Shen…"

Shen Qingqiu made a shushing gesture before his own mouth. These were the words he most feared hearing from Zhuzhi-Lang. By now he'd been enlightened to the nature of a snake's "repayment." Zhuzhi-Lang had repaid and repaid him until he'd swallowed Shen Qingqiu into his belly.

Zhuzhi-Lang awkwardly lifted his sleeves as if he was going to cover his mouth, but then lowered them back down. "Immortal Master Shen, please trust me," he coaxed him in an earnest tone. "If the Ties That Bind are not removed more than seven times a day, the root fragments will lodge inside your flesh forever. I've only extracted them three times today, and this is a critical juncture. If they're not extracted, Immortal Master Shen will be unable to keep this arm."

Once he heard there was a risk of disability, Shen Qingqiu lost all regard for his psychological needs and immediately offered his arm. Zhuzhi-Lang retrieved a red-hot coal from the little metal furnace, held it in his bare hand, and slapped it onto Shen Qingqiu's chest.

Shen Qingqiu had no words.

He'd just *known* he couldn't expect Zhuzhi-Lang to "help" him in a normal manner.

As soon as the coal touched the sprouts of Ties That Bind on his chest, they withered and curled under the heat, burning down to the roots. Shen Qingqiu wanted to grimace at the pain, but because that would be too unsightly, he tensed his face and bore it. After Zhuzhi-Lang had burned every patch of skin budding in green sprouts, Shen Qingqiu's right arm was at last presentable, at least for the time being.

Zhuzhi-Lang put the coal away. "I will have to burn them three more times in the afternoon and evening."

Shen Qingqiu pulled the outer robe he had removed earlier back over his shoulders. Zhuzhi-Lang accidentally glimpsed this and quickly lowered his head.

Outside, Tianlang-Jun laughed. "Silly child, what are you getting embarrassed for?"

Right, Shen Qingqiu also wanted to ask, *what are you getting embarrassed for?* What was there to be embarrassed about in a chest and arm that had just been riddled with fresh vegetation? What was there to be embarrassed about with regards to a being you'd swallowed and spat back up?

"My lord, please don't make fun of this subordinate," Zhuzhi-Lang said in all seriousness. "This subordinate absolutely does not have any improper intentions toward Immortal Master Shen." He looked at Shen Qingqiu, then emphasized, "Not the kind of improper intentions that Luo Binghe possesses."

What are you emphasizing that for?!

Zhuzhi-Lang scurried off the snake's back, carrying his little furnace, and returned to the ground to direct the troops. After being blown about by the wind for a while, Shen Qingqiu began to look all around, searching everywhere he could see. Xin Mo… Xin Mo… Where was Xin Mo?

Oh, outside, next to where Tianlang-Jun was sitting. The sword had been tossed aside next to his feet.

Shen Qingqiu was going to split his sides laughing.

That's Proud Immortal Demon Way*'s number one mystic sword! The number one solid golden finger in all of heaven and earth! And you just* *randomly chucked it somewhere! Is that really okay?!*

Tianlang-Jun had been propping his cheek on his hand, staring off into the distance, but when he noticed Shen Qingqiu's strange expression, he asked, "What is Peak Lord Shen looking at?" He paused, then followed his gaze down. "This sword of mine?"

"That's Luo Binghe's sword," Shen Qingqiu said flatly.

Tianlang-Jun smiled carelessly. "Peak Lord Shen, there was something I've very much wanted to ask you."

"Go ahead," he said. *Ask whatever, I'll answer whatever.*

"Have you and my son dual cultivated?"

Shen Qingqiu thought he had heard wrong. "My apologies. What did you say?"

Tianlang-Jun patiently repeated, "I asked Peak Lord Shen: Have you and Luo Binghe—"

Shen Qingqiu's face twitched, and he made a "stop" gesture.

"Or does Peak Lord Shen not understand what I mean by 'dual cultivated'? What I mean is—"

"That's enough," Shen Qingqiu said. *Have a sense of shame, okay?!* He forced himself to assume an air of calm. "Why would you think that I've dual cultivated with him?"

"To tell the truth, I've always admired Human Realm culture and customs," said Tianlang-Jun.

"So?" What the hell did admiring Human Realm customs have to do with this question?

Tianlang-Jun raised a finger and waved it, quietly humming a sweet and amorous tune.

Shen Qingqiu had maintained a neutral expression on his face like a proper grown man, but as Tianlang-Jun continued humming, his aloof countenance grew shakier and shakier.

Mother! Fucking! Regret! Of! Chunshan!

How had it already spread to the Demon Realm?!

Tianlang-Jun hummed two whole stanzas, pleased and seeming like he wished to continue. “Only the Human Realm, with its outstanding people and remarkable terrain, could nurture such an unparalleled masterpiece. The daring of the plot and the splendor of the verse are truly worthy of such compliments. Especially how every section ends with a hook that leaves one simply unable to stop, full of anticipation for the next installment.”

Woooow, and apparently this thing is fucking serialized too.

“Wait a minute,” said Shen Qingqiu. “The first time we met in the Holy Mausoleum, you said it was an honor to meet me ‘at last.’”

So Tianlang-Jun hadn’t said that just to be polite? He’d been looking forward to meeting Shen Qingqiu ever since encountering that pornographic little ditty?

“That is exactly what I meant,” Tianlang-Jun said with pleasure.

Communicated with the boss about his interests and hobbies. Villain’s character depth rating improved. Friendliness levels increased. B-Points +150!

What the hell kind of interests and hobbies are those?!

The two of them stared at each other for a while until the dark-skinned demon girl who had been taking care of Shen Qingqiu before he woke ran over, lively as a little gazelle. Shen Qingqiu took a closer look and found that she really did have a pair of gazelle legs. The girl hopped up and down, looking up and yelling, “My lord! Is the new place we’re going to really, really nice?”

Tianlang-Jun waved at her with a smile. “Of course, it’s the best.”

“Is there a lot of water?” the girl asked, all innocence.

“Rivers and mountain streams, flowing everywhere beneath the sky.”

The girl cried out in joy and hopped off into the distance.

Shen Qingqiu watched her retreating back, sensing something strange in this exchange. “Where are you moving them?”

“Peak Lord Shen has already come to a conclusion,” Tianlang-Jun said leisurely. “Why must he ask when he knows the answer?”

In terms of geological features, rivers and mountain streams were the opposite of common within the Demon Realm. This “nice place” was undoubtedly the Human Realm.

“Given your numbers, it looks like at least a fifth of the demons of the southern border have gathered in this army,” said Shen Qingqiu. “Does your distinguished self think the cultivation world won’t notice you crossing the borderlands in such a grand procession?”

“Who said I had to cross the borderlands?” Tianlang-Jun asked. He stood and gave Shen Qingqiu a disdainful smile. “What do you think I wanted this sword for?”

“You’re going to use Xin Mo to create a rift between the two realms?”

“To be more precise, to merge the two realms,” Tianlang-Jun corrected him.

Merging the Human and Demon Realms!

Wasn’t that the equivalent of crushing up two dimensions and mashing them together?

Shen Qingqiu didn’t find this idea unbelievable. In fact, he found it the exact opposite. He was certain that as long as one had Xin Mo in hand, achieving this ambition, which sounded like some absurd feat of the imagination, was absolutely possible—because he had evidence from the original work.

Merging the two realms was a lunatic move Luo Binghe had pulled to fully unite the Demon Realm and cultivation world when the original work neared its conclusion. Before, Shen Qingqiu had always thought that the original work’s “Luo Binghe” was the one he knew best. But thinking about it now, he realized that this character seemed very distant to him, almost like a stranger. That “Luo Binghe” cared not a single bit for the destructive consequences of such actions. His reason for doing it was that the separation of the realms made them difficult to govern, and resources were unevenly distributed. All his demon wives and lackeys kept blathering on about this, which annoyed him, so he decided to simply up and integrate them to make everything easier to manage.

“This is the ‘present’ you wanted to give?” Shen Qingqiu asked. “That’s quite a lot of malicious intent.”

Tianlang-Jun stroked his chin. “I don’t mean it as such,” he said in a gentlemanly tone. “I love the Human Realm very much, and enabling closer relations between the two races has always been my wish.”

Shen Qingqiu raised an eyebrow. “Has Tianlang-Jun really never thought about it, or does he just not care? Demons can adjust to the Human Realm, but how many humans outside of the cultivation world could grow accustomed to demons? Or, to put it another way,” he placed emphasis on select words in the following question, “even if you ‘love’ humans, can you guarantee that all the demons will love them as well? The races have been separated since ancient times, and countless conflicts still arise between them. If you merge the realms without proper consideration, you shouldn’t dream of having a single day of peace.”

“Peak Lord Shen is undeniably someone of the four major sects; you all sing that song,” Tianlang-Jun said helplessly. “This is a bit abrupt, but it wasn’t my original intent either. Having experienced one loss, I can only forge ahead, merge the realms first and take care of the rest later. We’ll take it slow. No matter how unaccustomed you may be to an unchangeable truth when first faced with it, you’ll adjust in the end.”

“All bosses are chuunis.” This really did seem to be a law of nature. But Tianlang-Jun’s situation was rather special. Perhaps he had been an innocent and idealistic chuuni before, who’d always thought that he could save the whole world and bring love and peace to the two races. After being trapped under Bai Lu Mountain for so long, he had become a bitter and resentful chuuni. So a gargantuan consequence like this would only be “a bit abrupt” in his words. The last part even sounded like rape culture logic: if you violate a person often enough, they’ll cooperate eventually; so do it first and think about the rest later.

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t resist asking, “So, you and Su Xiyan… Was that merely to ‘promote closer relations between the races’?”

When Tianlang-Jun suddenly heard this name, that smile, which had spread across his face like liquid ink, froze. He turned his head, and Shen Qingqiu could only hear him let out a quiet sigh. “Xiyan, she was truly…”

Truly what? Shen Qingqiu pondered the subtleties in Tianlang-Jun's tone. Agreeable and gentle? Kind and pure? My angel?

"Cold and heartless," Tianlang-Jun continued. "I loved her for that."

Shen Qingqiu was going to split his sides laughing.

Tianlang-Jun shrugged. "But either way, she's already dead."

So he didn't miss her at all? A demon's "love" would probably always be rather meager.

Shen Qingqiu was silent for a moment. "What exactly do you think of Luo Binghe?"

Tianlang-Jun looked at him. "I feel sorry for him?"

Shen Qingqiu put on an unaffected smile but had no way to respond.

Though Luo Binghe had never said a word about it before, Shen Qingqiu knew that he harbored some fantasies about his birth parents. He only knew that he had been born of a woman from a renowned sect and a noble of heavenly demon blood, but he didn't know who exactly his parents were, or their names. In fact, he'd always secretly fantasized about whether his parents might still be alive, and how well they'd treat him, and how they'd never let him suffer the mildest slight.

If Luo Binghe learned his birth father was this sort of person, with this kind of attitude—that this father might even look down on him because of his half-human parentage—those fantasies would become truly laughable.

Once night fell, this grand procession, with dust and sand billowing all around them, came to a stop on a lush plain. There they made camp, though the only ones who actually needed to camp were the few humanoid demons. Their beastly kin could just sleep under the open skies—in dirt burrows, in the trees, in the grass, wherever they could find.

Shen Qingqiu's bed was inside a wide and comfortable white tent. Its exterior was simple, but the interior was fully stocked. Zhuzhi-Lang personally made all the arrangements before bringing him inside. Once the demon girl who had accompanied him this whole time left, Shen Qingqiu eagerly lay down on the bed, closed his eyes, and waited for dreams to descend upon him.

An unknown amount of time later, he suddenly noticed the light shifting before his closed eyelids. Shen Qingqiu opened his eyes to see Luo Binghe kneeling in front of his bed. He only got half a sentence out of his mouth, "Luo Binghe, listen to me, there's something very important—" before Luo Binghe threw himself at him.

He landed right on top of Shen Qingqiu, shoving him back onto the bed, while something soft covered his mouth so entirely, he couldn't make even a single muffled sound. He could only lie there and glare, his face turning red with rage. Luo Binghe had no restraint: he deepened the kiss further and further, until he was gnawing at Shen Qingqiu like a small biting animal.

Shen Qingqiu finally managed to catch his breath. "Luo Binghe, kneel!"

Luo Binghe actually knelt with a sweep of his hem.

"Do you know why I told you to kneel?"

Luo Binghe kept his back ramrod-straight and said, "As a disciple, I violated Shizun—"

"Who's talking about that?! This master will settle that debt with you later. Tianlang-Jun told you to hand over Xin Mo, and you really just handed it over? I don't remember teaching you to be such a…"

Pure and sweet little fool!

"I had no choice," Luo Binghe said. "And it was nothing major. Why wouldn't I hand it over?"

What do you mean by "nothing major"? That's the golden finger no one else could have even if they begged and cried!

Reciting to himself that "not even a mountain of gold can withstand a spendthrift," Shen Qingqiu said, "Did you not consider why he wanted Xin Mo? What threat the northern and southern borders, as well as Cang Qiong Mountain and Huan Hua Palace, would suffer?"

"Is Shizun angry that I gave Xin Mo to him because he was afraid it would endanger all these places?" Luo Binghe asked. "Or only because it would endanger Cang Qiong Mountain?"

What was he saying? This was just like those girls who continually pestered their men saying things like: “Do you love me? Which do you love more, me or your career?” Shen Qingqiu wanted to keep hashing out the considerations of relative value with Luo Binghe and get back to business, but the words caught in his throat.

The light of the demonic foot soldiers’ torches lit the fabric of the tent from outside, and he heard the cries of beasts and calls of purposefully lowered voices.

No matter how he looked at it… This didn’t seem like the world within a dream. So, no matter how he looked at it, Luo Binghe was standing right there in his tent and *not* in the dream realm.

He had shown up in his real body!

He didn’t have Xin Mo to serve as an Anywhere Door,[3] and reaching here from the northern border required traveling a thousand kilometers at minimum. Shen Qingqiu really wanted to slap Luo Binghe upside the head, but when he considered this long journey, he had to think before doing anything to him.

Luo Binghe was creeping closer again, like a snake slithering up the stick you hit it with—one of his legs was already on the edge of the bed—which made Shen Qingqiu nearly spit blood, but he had to assume a shizun’s authority. “Luo Binghe, Luo Binghe, aren’t you too sure of yourself? Thinking you’re so skilled and courageous that you’d deliver yourself up, all alone. At least a fifth of the southern demons have joined this army—not to mention two seniors of your bloodline, who are most difficult to handle. If you’re discovered, it will only mean your death!”

“Shizun, I can’t steal you back outright; I’m afraid they’d activate the blood mites in your body. But you can’t expect me to just sit and wait,” Luo Binghe said. “Don’t scold me anymore, Shizun. I really couldn’t resist.”

Shen Qingqiu kept pushing Luo Binghe’s head away, doing all he could to maintain a proper mien. “Did you alert anyone when you infiltrated the camp?”

“Impossible,” said Luo Binghe. “If I want to be stealthy, not a soul will see me. There’s only one thing I’d need to worry about…”

Before he could say exactly what that was, a light cough sounded from outside the tent and they heard Zhuzhi-Lang's voice. "Immortal Master Shen? Have you retired?"

As soon as Luo Binghe heard this voice, murderous intent flared in his eyes, and he shot an ice-cold glare in that direction. Shen Qingqiu hurriedly shoved him down and gave him a severe look, ordering him not to do anything rash. For some reason, even though Luo Binghe had been glared at, a faint blush rose on his cheeks. Shen Qingqiu shuddered at the sight.

Demonic troops were patrolling outside, while inside, there was nowhere to hide, so as a last resort, Shen Qingqiu lifted the blankets on his bed, and Luo Binghe cheerfully slid beneath them.

Outside, Zhuzhi-Lang wondered to himself, "Is he asleep this early?"

Everything was silent outside for a while, and Shen Qingqiu almost thought Zhuzhi-Lang had left. He was about to let out a sigh of relief when Zhuzhi-Lang continued, "Then…this humble one will be disturbing your rest."

So you're coming in whether I'm asleep or not? Then why the hell did you even ask?!

Luo Binghe poked his head out and asked suspiciously, "What is this snake coming to do while Shizun's asleep?"

Just hide properly, you little rascal!

Shen Qingqiu shoved Luo Binghe's head back under the blanket and hopped off the bed. "Don't come in!"

Zhuzhi-Lang indeed didn't come in. "So you haven't retired?" he asked, confused. "Immortal Master Shen, why didn't you answer just now?"

"I was tired, and I didn't want to talk. Xizhi-Lang, you can go."

Zhuzhi-Lang was perplexed. "Didn't we agree on this earlier today?"

Damn it, damn it, damn it. Indeed, earlier he had agreed to let Zhuzhi-Lang come back in the evening to burn off the rest of the Ties That Bind!

Luo Binghe popped his head out again and quietly demanded, “Agreed on what?”

Shen Qingqiu had just finished piling a second set of blankets on top of Luo Binghe and lowering the bed curtains when Zhuzhi-Lang stepped into the tent. He was holding that little metal furnace, gaze averted to the side. “Immortal Master Shen, I beg your pardon for intruding so late at night. But further complications will arise if the Ties That Bind are not completely extracted.”

It would be too suspicious to drive him out after letting him in. Plus, Zhuzhi-Lang was strangely hesitant to look at Shen Qingqiu too much either way, so he would just have to be careful. Shen Qingqiu stood in front of the bed curtains with a faint smile. “I understand. Thank you for your trouble.”

“I’m merely doing my duty,” Zhuzhi-Lang said politely. “Immortal Master Shen, why don’t you sit on the bed?”

He even took a step in that direction, but Shen Qingqiu slid in front of him and grabbed his arm, turning him around in a half circle.

Only when Zhuzhi-Lang had his back toward the bed curtains did Shen Qingqiu continue, “Not on the bed. Right here.”

Dragged by the arm, Zhuzhi-Lang had been inexplicably forced to about-face, but he was hesitant to ask why. He took it as a momentary whim and asked, good-naturedly, “While standing?”

“While standing,” Shen Qingqiu said resolutely.

“Immortal Master Shen will be able to bear it?”

Behind him, Luo Binghe threw off the blankets, fury written across his face.

Shen Qingqiu remained impassive. “I’ve grown used to it.”

Zhuzhi-Lang nodded and turned to set the furnace on the table. Shen Qingqiu took this opportunity to send a palm strike at Luo Binghe across the space between them, knocking him back into the blankets and covering him back up at top speed. By the time Zhuzhi-Lang turned around, both were in their proper places and nothing was amiss.

Zhuzhi-Lang retrieved a red-hot coal. “Immortal Master Shen, please remove your outer robe.”

Shen Qingqiu looked down and began to very slowly untie his sash. He didn’t dare to do it fast—if he really took it off, Luo Binghe would probably break both the bed and the other person in the room. His hands creeped with agonizing slowness, and after waiting for forever, Zhuzhi-Lang finally couldn’t help himself from taking a peek. “Immortal Master Shen, is it too difficult with your fingers’ condition? Do you need this humble one’s assistance?”

Seeing Zhuzhi-Lang begin to look up, Shen Qingqiu yanked at his lapels, and his outer robe slid right off his shoulders.

Having yanked it off like that, his robe fell to his feet. Then he shoved his arm under Zhuzhi-Lang’s nose, and the latter no longer had the attention to spare for anything else as he began examining it with care. After his tireless efforts to remove the Ties That Bind for a whole day, they finally showed signs of receding. The right half of Shen Qingqiu’s chest and his right arm were no longer as lushly foliated as they had been when he had first awoken, and only a few scattered little buds remained.

Luo Binghe silently sent out a palm strike, and a wave of black qi rushed straight at Zhuzhi-Lang’s back. Shen Qingqiu waved his arm and sent the coal in Zhuzhi-Lang’s hand flying with a smack.

The coal tumbled outside the tent, and having been slapped for no reason, Zhuzhi-Lang was greatly perplexed.

“My hand slipped,” Shen Qingqiu said apologetically.

Zhuzhi-Lang accepted this explanation without jumping a single mental hurdle and went outside to pick it up. He walked around for a time outside, confused. “Where did it roll off to?”

With a tap of his foot, Shen Qingqiu leapt into the bed.

“Shizun, what sort of days have you lived while under their thumb?!” Luo Binghe whispered.

What sort of days? Idle ones spent lazing around doing nothing, pretty much…

“Don’t mess around!” Shen Qingqiu whispered back. Then with a smooth motion, he shoved Luo Binghe back under the blankets.

Luo Binghe was sullen and utterly unwilling to just let things go on like this. He didn’t think he’d be absolutely defenseless against Tianlang-Jun, but as long as the blood mites in his shizun’s body were not removed, he had to restrain himself. With a crook of his finger, the outer robe on the floor flew into his hand, and he draped it over Shen Qingqiu’s shoulders. “Put your clothes on!”

Outside, a minor demon passing by the tent greeted Zhuzhi-Lang. “General!”

Zhuzhi-Lang acknowledged his greeting. “You came at just the right time. Help me find something.” His bearing and tone were entirely different from how he spoke to Tianlang-Jun and Shen Qingqiu, and it truly matched his status as a big shot general.

“Put what on?” Shen Qingqiu said. “I was always going to take it off.”

Luo Binghe was enraged. “Shizun, why do you insist on taking off your clothes for him to see?”

He shoved Luo Binghe down again and again but still failed to make him behave, and Zhuzhi-Lang suddenly returned while Shen Qingqiu was still struggling. Not having the time to return to his original spot, Shen Qingqiu whirled around and threw himself down, getting into a seated position in the center of the bed.

“Immortal Master Shen, didn’t you just say you didn’t want to do it on the bed?” Zhuzhi-Lang asked.

Shen Qingqiu laughed. “Oh? Really? Did I say that?”

In his haste to hide Luo Binghe, he’d accidentally sat on top of him… But that had worked out; Luo Binghe was finally docile and didn’t move.

Zhuzhi-Lang walked up to the bed, and seeing the mess of blankets, casually remarked, “Isn’t Immortal Master Shen warm?”

Shen Qingqiu wanted only to get this over with as quickly as possible. He grabbed Zhuzhi-Lang’s arm and pressed the red-hot coal to his chest. Amidst the hissing sounds of burning, he said calmly, “It’s not too warm.”

“Then Immortal Master Shen…doesn’t it hurt?”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

Pleased, Zhuzhi-Lang said, “Immortal Master Shen was always so reluctant every time before, yet tonight he’s finally taken the initiative for once. This is how it should have been.”

Shen Qingqiu wasn’t listening at all carefully to what he was saying, only thinking to finish this as fast as possible so he could shoo Zhuzhi-Lang out as fast as possible. He asked, “Is that enough?”

Zhuzhi-Lang took the coal away. “It’s enough.”

Shen Qingqiu was overjoyed. Luo Binghe was probably at his limit too. But he never expected that Zhuzhi-Lang would add, “Just now, my lord said that he wanted to visit you tonight—”

Before he finished the first syllable of that last word, Luo Binghe at last couldn’t take it anymore and exploded into action.

Shen Qingqiu hadn’t even seen how Luo Binghe moved before Zhuzhi-Lang was down on one knee, coughing up a mouthful of blood. When he looked up again, another person was on the bed. Luo Binghe had one arm around Shen Qingqiu, glaring at Zhuzhi-Lang with fury in his eyes. After his initial shock, Zhuzhi-Lang’s expression quickly evolved into one of realization. “You? Immortal Master Shen? You two!”

Shen Qingqiu buried his forehead in his hands. He didn’t want to say a word. Luo Binghe lifted his other hand and made a clenching motion. A black handprint appeared on Zhuzhi-Lang’s throat, and his body jerked upward to float in midair.

“Don’t kill him, there’ll be consequences,” Shen Qingqiu cut in. “And the situation isn’t what you think it is…”

Luo Binghe’s lips were taut, and veins popped on the back of his hand as his fingers tightened. Zhuzhi-Lang’s face slowly turned green, but he showed not a single sign of pain.

Right then, another voice spoke from outside the tent. “Peak Lord Shen, may I come in?”

Why was it so lively tonight? Speak of the devil. Shen Qingqiu's doorway was practically a marketplace!

In a second, the faces of all three people inside the tent—the strangler, the strangled, and the witness—went dark. In a chaotic flurry of motion, Shen Qingqiu pointed at Zhuzhi-Lang, dangling by the throat, then pointed at Luo Binghe and made a motion to represent slitting someone's throat, followed by crossing his arms into an X. Who knew if Luo Binghe understood, since he just shook his head again and again. Under these circumstances, it was obvious that no one was going to answer the person outside.

After a moment of silence, Tianlang-Jun said, "I'm coming in."

He was just like his nephew—both of them only asked for show before walking right in!

So, when Tianlang-Jun walked in, he saw precisely this scene:

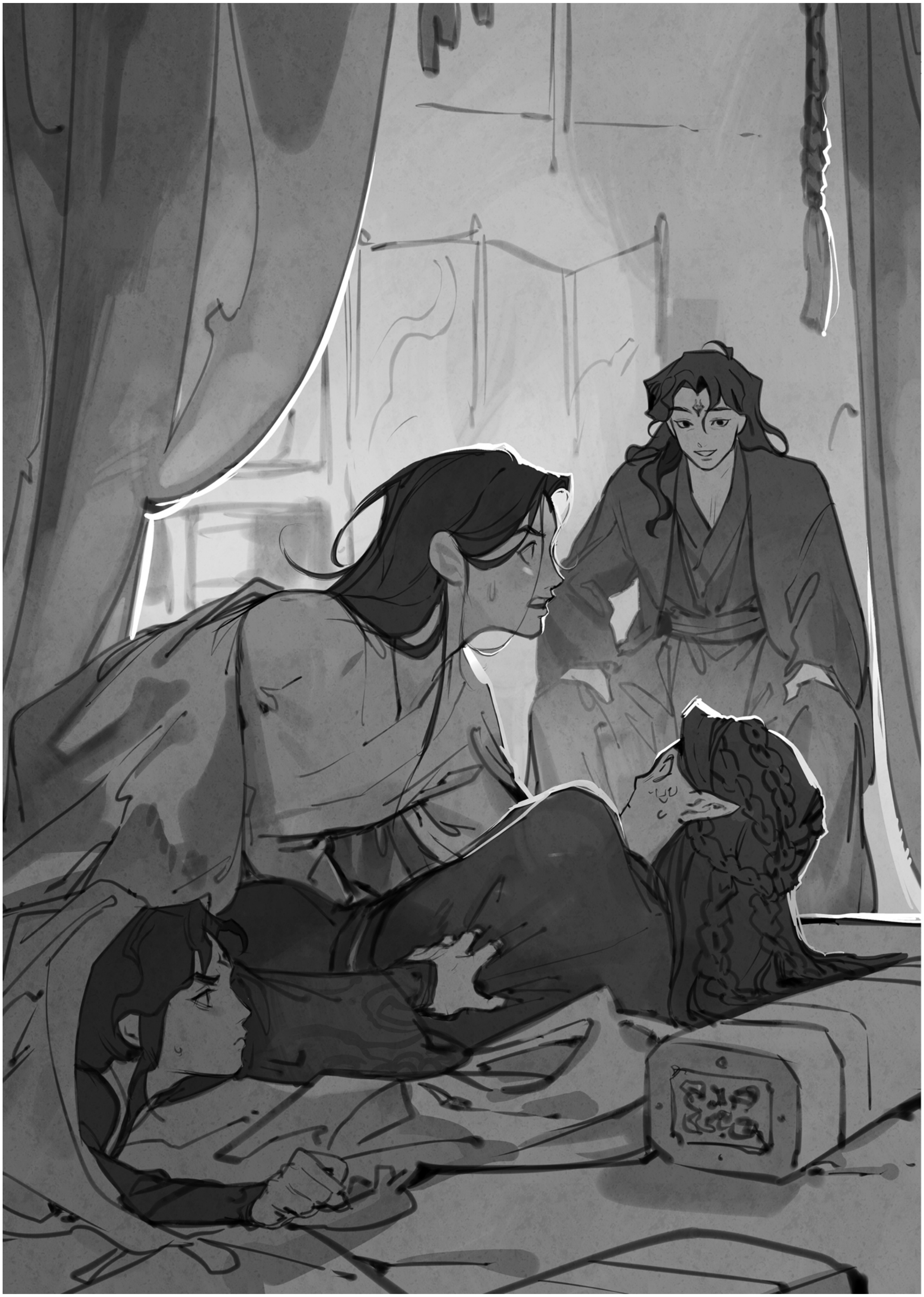
Zhuzhi-Lang and Shen Qingqiu were pulling and tugging at each other as they tumbled upon the bed, a towering mess of blankets piled behind them. When Tianlang-Jun entered, both of them whipped their heads around, and in those four eyes, on those two faces, were identical expressions, complexions splotched white and red. Shen Qingqiu's robe still hung off his elbow, halfway removed.

Even with how much of a weirdo Tianlang-Jun was, his smiling expression still froze on his face at this scene. Only after a while did he say in a light voice, "How unexpected."

Zhuzhi-Lang blushed. "My lord, the situation is a bit complicated. Either way, it's not what you think…"

His body blocked the blanket covering Luo Binghe, and Shen Qingqiu was half sprawled on top of him, hiding the hand Luo Binghe had clenched on the small of Zhuzhi-Lang's back—a vital acupoint. With their sprawled positions combined with the fluttering curtains, it would definitely be difficult to discover there was an extra person for some time yet.

Tianlang-Jun nodded. He actually seemed a bit happy as he said, "There's no need to explain, I understand. I understand everything."



Given his tastes and assumptions as a lover of *Regret of Chunshan*, if he said he "understood," then there was most definitely a need to explain!

"Is there any reason for your distinguished self to visit at such late hours?" Shen Qingqiu asked. "If there is, please explain; if not, let's all rest. Thank you, I won't be seeing you out."

"Actually, it wasn't anything major," said Tianlang-Jun. "There was just a minor abnormality. And I didn't know where Zhuzhi-Lang had run off to, so I checked here first. But it seems that it was not the time. No matter, please continue. I don't mind."

"My lord…" said Zhuzhi-Lang.

Whenever he spoke another word, Luo Binghe exerted more force.

Whenever he shifted his leg slightly, Luo Binghe exerted more force.

Whenever he tried to change positions, Luo Binghe also exerted more force.

He exerted more and more force, and a torrent of demonic qi poured in through the small of Zhuzhi-Lang's back, until a bitter taste rose in his mouth.

Zhuzhi-Lang didn't know what it meant to "feel bummed out," but he was certainly experiencing what it was like to be bummed out right now.

"All right," said Shen Qingqiu. "Many thanks for your consideration. Then we'll continue. Please see yourself out."

But Tianlang-Jun did not seem about to leave. Instead, he found a stool and sat down. "Why does Peak Lord Shen not ask me exactly what I mean by 'a minor abnormality'?" he asked leisurely. "This is most unlike your previous curiosity and enthusiasm."

It looked like this guy wasn't going to be so easy to chase off. Realizing that he couldn't escape this problem, Shen Qingqiu instead calmed down and smiled. "If Tianlang-Jun really likes to watch, it is no matter if he wishes to converse and livens things up. Please go ahead."

And so Tianlang-Jun began "livening things up." "Not long ago, the Xin Mo sword I kept by my side suddenly began to levitate and hum persisently. Clearly no one was summoning it, yet this phenomenon occurred. It truly demands one pay a bit of attention.”

Shen Qingqiu immediately understood that the “one thing” Luo Binghe “needed to worry about,” which he hadn’t had a chance to explain, was, in short, Xin Mo. After all, a sword that had followed Luo Binghe for so many years would inevitably have some sort of reaction when its master appeared nearby.

“Verily, that is a curious event,” Shen Qingqiu said. “But I’m afraid there isn’t much meaning in Tianlang-Jun discussing this with me.”

Tianlang-Jun slowly stood. “It is most definitely meaningless to discuss it with Peak Lord Shen. But, if a certain naughty child comes looking for him, that would make it *very* meaningful.”

Though it was only a few short words, with every couple he spoke, he would pause, taking a step closer to the bed each time.

Shen Qingqiu was visibly holding on to Zhuzhi-Lang with both arms, and Luo Binghe was secretly pinching Zhuzhi-Lang’s acupoint. As Tianlang-Jun took step after step, getting closer and closer, the force behind this master-disciple pair’s actions grew and grew. Zhuzhi-Lang truly was… very much without fault, and very much unfortunate.

Just as Tianlang-Jun made to lift the bed curtains, the shrill and sonorous cry of a wild beast sounded from outside the tent. He whipped around to look.

Outside the white tent, firelight surged into the skies, while soaring black shadows were cast from all directions. The roars of beasts mixed with hysterical screams.

“Invaders!”

“Surround him! All of you, surround him!”

“Don’t let him escape!”

“—he’s gotten out—!”

Blade met blade while swords and arrows tore through the air, uniting in a raucous chorus with the sound of fangs and claws tearing into flesh. Tianlang-Jun didn’t have time to say a single word and darted out of the tent. Shen Qingqiu's heart dropped back down from where it had been suspended. This invader's timing was just perfect!

Luo Binghe flipped off the bed and helped Shen Qingqiu down. Zhuzhi-Lang had been tossed to the floor and was unable to move for the time being.

Shen Qingqiu looked down and said, "Many thanks for just now."

With Zhuzhi-Lang's degree of loyalty, not disregarding his personal safety to yell, "My lord! It's them! It was these two!" counted as intentional help.

Upon hearing this, Zhuzhi-Lang sighed. "This humble one understands."

"Understands what?" Shen Qingqiu asked.

Luo Binghe was impatient. "Why waste time talking to him?"

Zhuzhi-Lang looked up and said in full sincerity, "To alleviate the pain of longing, Immortal Master Shen had a clandestine encounter in the depths of night. Though this would inevitably be a blight upon his honor, the circumstances are understandable."

Shen Qingqiu had no words.

This child had probably spent so long by Tianlang-Jun's side that he'd assimilated the latter's thought patterns. Indeed, Shen Qingqiu really shouldn't have wasted his time talking to him!

The master-disciple pair slunk out of the tent only to see that, not too far away on the overgrown plains, the dark masses of the southern border demon army had surrounded someone or something. The two dazzling, pure-white silhouettes in the center were especially eye-catching. One was a sword, swooping with unstoppable momentum, while the other was a person, who left not a blade of grass or shard of armor in his wake. The circle surrounding him was broken again and again, and new demons filled in the gaps one after another.

Tianlang-Jun's honest words of admiration drifted over on the night wind. "Excellent bladework. Excellent spiritual power!"

The newcomer stood atop the head of a giant armor-wearing wolf that he had slain with his bare hands. His white clothes were spotless, and he was marred only by a small splatter of blood across his cheek.

This fighting style—that went for max fanfare, that was simple and brutal, and where the attacker seemed loath to leave a single member of the enemy camp unaware of his grand arrival—certainly didn't let down Bai Zhan Peak's reputation for arrogance and love of battle.

It was Liu Qingge.

Two pure-white wargs leapt through the crowd of beasts to prostrate themselves at Tianlang-Jun's feet. One raised its head, and a human voice came from its mouth. "My lord, it's Cang Qiong Mountain's Bai Zhan Peak Lord, Liu Qingge!"

Tianlang-Jun nodded. "So that's how it is. No wonder his bladework and spiritual power are so superb. But why would the Bai Zhan Peak Lord suddenly grace the southern border with his presence?"

Liu Qingge leaned to the side slightly, and Cheng Luan flew back into his hand. He flicked away the beads of blood gathered upon the blade tip and said coldly, "Is Shen Qingqiu here?"

Shen Qingqiu was overwhelmed by this show of favor. What, was Great Master Liu here to rescue him?

Luo Binghe took a glance at the expression on his face and pursed his lips.

Tianlang-Jun finally understood. "So you're here to look for Peak Lord Shen. He is indeed here with me."

"Bring him out," said Liu Qingge.

"It may be a bad time for him to see you," Tianlang-Jun said suggestively. "And even if he did, he likely wouldn't want to return to Cang Qiong Mountain with you."

Shen Qingqiu didn't even know what complaints to sputter at this.

Liu Qingge squinted.

One of the wargs at Tianlang-Jun's feet said, "'Hundred Battles' Bai Zhan Peak, they say? In my opinion, they don't truly deserve the name. I heard that when this Liu Qingge fought that Luo Binghe kid, he lost horribly countless times; he hasn't lived up to that peak name for a long while. It should be called 'Ninety-Nine Battles' Peak by now."

"No, he should be called the 'Ninety-Eight Battles' Peak Lord," the other continued. "If he fought our lord, he'd lose without a doubt!"

These two beasts were so mouthy. Sycophantic and mouthy!

With this disagreeable remark, the brawl broke out anew.

Liu Qingge tapped his foot and flew forward like an arc of white lightning. Tianlang-Jun was in no hurry to enter the fray. With a casual flick of his arm, blood flew from his fingertips. When the droplets hit the ground, they didn't soak into the dirt but instead solidified, quickly forming into six blood wolves with crimson fur. They surrounded Liu Qingge, biting and tearing at him as they circled him like wheels of wind and fire.

With incredible ease, Liu Qingge unleashed Cheng Luan, and the heads of all six beasts separated from their bodies, melting them back into liquid form. But when the sword flew back to him, the blood wolves rapidly coalesced again and continued their dance of bared fangs and waving claws. Though Liu Qingge's attack was powerful and precise, without a flaw to be named, neither did it have any actual effect. Nor did Tianlang-Jun lower his bleeding hand. He kept it lazily extended, and as the blood dripped down, new beasts sprang up one after another.

He's bleeding that much and his face doesn't even pale for a second. Is he a mobile blood bank?!

Liu Qingge *was* here to save him; Shen Qingqiu couldn't just remain an onloooker, watching this fire from the opposite shore, remaining aloof to the conflict. He was about to move when Luo Binghe stole ahead of him and dashed outside.

Tianlang-Jun looked intently at Luo Binghe. "So you came after all."

"Shizun is here; how could I not come?" Luo Binghe said coldly.

"Zhuzhi-Lang, look at this face of his," Tianlang-Jun said with a smile. "The sight of this look of cold fury truly makes me happy… Hm? Zhuzhi-Lang?" Only now did he realize that Zhuzhi-Lang still hadn't arrived, and no one was there to chime in. A disappointed expression crossed Tianlang-Jun's face.

Off to the side, Liu Qingge was about to speak when he suddenly saw Shen Qingqiu and forgot the insults he was about to spit. He froze for a second, then shouted, “Hey!”

Shen Qingqiu waved back in greeting.

The shock on Tianlang-Jun’s face grew rather than waned. He turned toward Luo Binghe. “So…just now…in there—all three of you?”

He took three pauses for the entire sentence, but Shen Qingqiu still understood what he meant to express. He couldn’t say whether Luo Binghe understood, but the latter leapt into battle with a dark look on his face.

The fight, encircled by a throng of beasts on the plain, immediately became a three-way battle royale. Tianlang-Jun fought two, Liu Qingge also fought two, and Luo Binghe fought one and ignored one while simultaneously meeting the attacks of two. Black qi and white light flashed everywhere, and the hum of swords and cries of beasts surged into the skies.

Liu Qingge wanted to come to Shen Qingqiu’s aid, but the circle surrounding him amassed more and more. Cheng Luan spun, transforming into a small tornado, and a dozen blood beasts were dragged inside, shredded into thousands of flying droplets of blood.

Shen Qingqiu yelled, “Close your mouth! Don’t swallow it!”

Liu Qingge didn’t need to close his mouth at all, because the blood couldn’t touch him in the first place.

But Tianlang-Jun laughed. “I had forgotten that Peak Lord Shen was still here.”

Shen Qingqiu rather wished he’d stayed forgotten… As soon as Tianlang-Jun remembered him, he was doomed to no longer have a good time. Twisting pains crawled up from his stomach in thickets. Luo Binghe had been the fiercest fighter, with every strike aimed at Tianlang-Jun. Now his momentum abruptly slowed, and his attention was also divided.

Shen Qingqiu called out, “Keep fighting. Don’t mind me!”

He neither cried nor shouted but returned to the tent and dragged Zhuzhi-Lang with him, a smile twisting his face. “Now this time, you can’t throw yourself on my sword again, can you?”

Zhuzhi-Lang was helpless. “Immortal Master Shen and my lord have both granted me great favor; why must you always put me in difficult situations?”

Cold sweat trickled down Shen Qingqiu’s spine from the pain, and he shot him a perfunctory retort to distract himself. “You certainly separate your debts and grudges very clearly.”

Every single one of the demon realm’s public servants were as honestly devoted to their profession as Sha Hualing, never forgetting to evangelize their bosses for a second. Even beneath Shen Qingqiu’s sword, Zhuzhi-Lang kept cajoling him. “That’s right. So, since the four major sects used lowly methods to besiege and entrap my lord, one day, they must pay. And since my lord said that not one of Cang Qiong Mountain, Zhao Hua Monastery, Huan Hua Palace, nor Tian Yi Temple would be spared, not a single one will be spared.”

When he mentioned Huan Hua Palace, Shen Qingqiu’s heart suddenly clenched.

After his escape from Huan Hua Palace’s Water Prison, he had heard that every one of the Huan Hua Palace disciples guarding the Water Prison had been killed; not even Gongyi Xiao had survived. The blame for this had fallen on Shen Qingqiu’s head, and in turn, he had slapped it onto Luo Binghe’s. All this time on the run, he’d never had the chance to figure out exactly who’d done the deed.

Zhuzhi-Lang treated Shen Qingqiu well because some time ago, he had stopped Gongyi Xiao from killing him, so he counted as a benefactor. Conversely, to Zhuzhi-Lang, Gongyi Xiao must have been an enemy.

Shen Qingqiu asked, “Do you remember a person called Gongyi Xiao?”

Zhuzhi-Lang thought for a moment. “That Huan Hua Palace disciple?”

So he did remember.

“Some time ago, I went to the Water Prison to meet Immortal Master Shen, but by the time I arrived, you were already gone, and only that disciple was left, wandering around alone. The night was dark, and this humble one mistook him for Luo Binghe and so went to investigate.”

Shen Qingqiu understood. From the back, Gongyi Xiao's figure and silhouette were indeed somewhat similar to Luo Binghe's. At first glance, even their faces had subtle similarities. So, for a period of time, Shen Qingqiu had felt especially close to Gongyi Xiao.

Zhuzhi-Lang continued, "Later, after I realized he was the head disciple of Huan Hua Palace who had entered the mushroom cave with Immortal Master Shen in Bai Lu Forest, I killed him on the way out."

Killed him on the way out.

Zhuzhi-Lang really was a very simple demon, and as his uncle said, "a little foolish." Tianlang-Jun offered him support, so Zhuzhi-Lang would follow him to the death; Shen Qingqiu inadvertently saved him, so Zhuzhi-Lang had always tried to repay him, albeit by his own logic.

Along the same lines, every slight had to be avenged.

But Gongyi Xiao's death had been rather profoundly undeserved. He had only been *about* to kill Zhuzhi-Lang—he hadn't actually done it!

When Shen Qingqiu had parted with Gongyi Xiao in the Water Prison, the boy had said, "If we have the fortune to meet again, Senior must keep his promise and bring me to visit Qing Jing Peak. This junior will be waiting." It was as if these words were still ringing in Shen Qingqiu's ear.

Shen Qingqiu found it hard to look directly at Zhuzhi-Lang. The ease with which he had looked at him previously was already gone. Zhuzhi-Lang had just noticed this change when Shen Qingqiu stood up and walked off.

Zhuzhi-Lang was surprised. "Where are you going?"

"Wherever, as long as it's far away," said Shen Qingqiu.

Heavenly demons were all lunatics. Being with one lunatic had to be better than being with two. At least that one listened to him.

Zhuzhi-Lang looked like he'd been stabbed. "I just want to treat the people who've helped me well," he said quickly. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"The problem is that you think what you're doing is treating me well, but I don't think the same," Shen Qingqiu said.

With every step he took, he felt his blood vessels twitching, like thousands and thousands of insects were squirming and biting within them. Luo Binghe looked back at him again and again, only barely avoiding being struck several times.

Zhuzhi-Lang raised his voice. "Even if Immortal Master Shen will meet a miserable end, he would still insist on taking their side?"

Shen Qingqiu didn't answer, just kept walking.

At the sight of this, Zhuzhi-Lang said quietly, "I understand."

Just after those words left his mouth, the dull pain within Shen Qingqiu's body disappeared.

Tianlang-Jun's voice rose, carrying a hint of irritation. "What are you doing?"

Of everyone present, only the heavenly demons knew what was going on. Shen Qingqiu's body had three sets of blood mites within it, and Luo Binghe had been fighting one-on-two, at a slight disadvantage. But just then, Zhuzhi-Lang stopped inciting his blood mites to fight against Luo Binghe's and instead changed sides to join hands with Luo Binghe to suppress Tianlang-Jun's blood.

If it no longer hurt, what did he have to fear? Shen Qingqiu drew Xiu Ya, leapt onto his sword, and yelled, "Liu-shidi, let's go!"

Seeing him fly in his direction, Liu Qingge also flipped atop Cheng Luan. Tianlang-Jun finally stopped playing around with his blood and attacked with a palm strike billowing with demonic qi, only to be parried by Luo Binghe. As Shen Qingqiu passed by, he reached out to grab Luo Binghe, and Luo Binghe raised his own arm in return. In a seamless sequence of movements, their hands connected, and with a pull, Shen Qingqiu brought Luo Binghe onto Xiu Ya. Two sets of sword glares shot off toward the horizon.

Wails and cries echoed all across the plain. Tianlang-Jun snapped his fingers, and the remaining several dozen blood beasts lost all their power; their skin, fur, and fangs rapidly melted. Before long, they turned into a splatter of blood droplets and soaked into the ground. He looked at Zhuzhi-Lang. "Letting them go just like that?"

Zhuzhi-Lang didn’t say a word, going down on one knee.

Tianlang-Jun possessed admirable composure, and his anger only persisted for a moment before it passed. “You went to all that trouble, yet he didn’t appreciate it a bit, only wholeheartedly rushed down the road to ruin. Zhuzhi-Lang, your lord is sympathetic.”

Motioning for Zhuzhi-Lang to get up, he casually remarked, “But there is no need to be upset. One day, Peak Lord Shen will understand you are doing what is best for him. A day not far from this one.”

Looking again at the night horizon, Tianlang-Jun said, “But I really never imagined. To think Peak Lord Shen likes it with more people. Does there need to be at least three every time?”

Silence reigned.

Zhuzhi-Lang’s heart, originally turbulent, instantly became a wind-ravaged wasteland, absent a single blade of grass.

His lord had probably been reading those strange illustrated pamphlets from the Human Realm again.

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The trio flew kilometers away, heading straight for the borderlands.

Liu Qingge hadn’t thought Shen Qingqiu would bring Luo Binghe as well. “What did you grab him for?” he snapped. “Why are the two of you together?!”

Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe held deep grudges against each other, and Shen Qingqiu couldn’t properly explain within a short amount of time, so he just said vaguely, “There are reasons…”

When Shen Qingqiu didn’t refute them being “together,” Luo Binghe’s eyes brightened, and his lips also curved into a smile.

At the sight of him overflowing with joy for no particular reason, Liu Qingge was alarmed and formed a seal with his hand, spiritual energy sparking between his fingers. “Shen Qingqiu, get over here.”

Luo Binghe's expression changed faster than a flipped page. He had been all tender affection the moment before, but in the next, contempt filled his features, and he tightened his arms around Shen Qingqiu's waist. Luo Binghe had already been holding him tight, and with this added force, Shen Qingqiu almost couldn't breathe. He slapped Luo Binghe's hands away before saying, "Liu-shidi, it is indeed somewhat complicated. Let's get away first, and I'll take my time to explain later. Trust me for now."

"I trust you," said Liu Qingge. "But I don't trust him."

"*I* trust him," Shen Qingqiu replied without a moment's hesitation.

Liu Qingge's brows furrowed, and he said harshly, "You trusted him before, and how did that end?"

Luo Binghe's faint smile was like needles hidden within cotton floss, his voice neither cold nor warm. "Shizun already said he trusted me. Why are you still wasting your breath?"

Have you not had enough fighting?!

"Is that how you speak to your shishu?" said Shen Qingqiu.

Liu Qingge didn't speak much in the first place, so who was wasting his breath? In fact, he didn't say anything further and instead flung out a spiritual blast.

We're flying at high altitude—is it fun fighting atop swords? Careful, safety first!

Shen Qingqiu veered slightly off course, but though Luo Binghe should have dodged the blow with this, he let out a muffled groan behind him.

Shen Qingqiu turned. "What is it?"

Had he really been hit?

Luo Binghe shook his head. "I'm fine. It doesn't hurt."

Reasonably speaking, even if Luo Binghe had been hit, it shouldn't be a big deal. Shen Qingqiu looked him over carefully and noticed that, in fact, a bit of black qi had gathered at the acupoint between his brows. He muttered, "You don't look so good."

"After the fight, I was a bit dizzy, and now I'm dizzier," Luo Binghe said softly, his voice weak. "But it's nothing really, just a spiritual blast."

Liu Qingge's urge to face Luo Binghe in a bloody battle to the last grew and grew. How many times had they fought, and now one spiritual blast had him dizzy? "Shen Qingqiu, move aside."

Shen Qingqiu sent him an apologetic smile. "Liu-shidi, he was injured earlier and has only just healed; you mustn't stoop to his level. He doesn't know better; if he offended you, I'll apologize for him."

There was a dark look on Liu Qingge's face.

"He made a lot of mistakes before, but he won't from now on," Shen Qingqiu continued. "I will definitely discipline him properly…"

Liu Qingge's face finally turned pale. "You really trust him?"

Shen Qingqiu felt a bit guilty. Luo Binghe was still hugging him around the waist with that anxious expression on his face, like he was waiting for Shen Qingqiu's reply. To be honest, he had never genuinely trusted Luo Binghe before, and that was why he had kept accidentally hurting him. With the way things were now…

"I would rather believe I can than prematurely determine that I cannot," he said.

In a household with children who didn't know better, the adults never had it easy. After offering up apologetic explanations, Shen Qingqiu turned to compliments. "After being apart these many days, it seems Liu-shidi's cultivation has advanced again."

Liu Qingge lifted his chin. "I just exited seclusion."

When Luo Binghe had launched a siege upon Cang Qiong Mountain, Liu Qingge had told him, "Just you wait!" Following this, he had indeed gone to cultivate in seclusion. After leaving, he had gone directly to rescue Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu rubbed his nose, feeling that a simple "thank you" seemed insufficient. "How did you know to come to the southern border to find me?"

After Liu Qingge left seclusion, he had rushed at top speed to Luo Binghe's territory on the Demon Realm's northern border and slaughtered his way in, nearly overturning the whole place, only to find that Shen Qingqiu was not there. Luo Binghe wasn't there either, having apparently rushed by to give a few instructions before immediately leaving. Liu Qingge had subsequently caught that demoness called "Sha Whatever" to interrogate her. However, Bai Zhan Peak's interrogation methods simply involved beating up the subject, and at the very most involved beating them up to different degrees. Of course Great Master Liu had some difficulties beating up a woman, and Sha Hualing was also a very difficult woman to deal with, so he hadn't extracted anything from her.

Fortunately, he had then run into Shang Qinghua, who had nothing to do beyond eating his fill and wandering around in boredom all day. Liu Qingge had absolutely no reservations about that guy. But as soon as he raised his fist, Sha Qinghua spilled everything in an unceasing flood, including what Shen Qingqiu's diet in the Demon Realm was like, his daily diversions, and the vital information about how Shen Qingqiu had been taken to the southern border.

After he'd squeezed this out of him, Liu Qingge had planned to execute the traitor on the spot. He hadn't anticipated that as Shang Qinghua hugged his thighs and wailed like a banshee, swearing over and over that he had no choice, that he would turn over a new leaf, his cries would draw Mobei-Jun's attention. Liu Qingge and Mobei-Jun had subsequently fought, collapsing nearly half of Luo Binghe's underground palace, and this had cost Liu Qingge some time.

This violent path full of ups and downs was the one Great Master Liu had trod over the past few days.

Going to such effort and trouble… Liu Qingge was truly more reliable than a blood brother![4]

After Shen Qingqiu expressed his overwhelming gratitude in his reserved manner, he swapped to a serious tone and changed the topic. "Liu-shidi, I have business I must discuss with you."

"Speak."

"Do you know of Tianlang-Jun?"

To the people of the cultivation world, this name was legendary.

Years ago, the four major sects had emptied their halls for that battle in which Tianlang-Jun had been sealed beneath Bai Lu Mountain. Though the forces of Cang Qiong Mountain had been one of the main participants, the ones who actually went to battle were the previous generation of peak lords. Of the current peak lords, only Yue Qingyuan had participated in that battle, as the head disciple of Qiong Ding Peak. With Xuan Su, his talent had shone, and he had played a key part.

Of course Liu Qingge was not ignorant of this. “The previous Saintly Ruler of the demon race? His physical body was destroyed seven or eight years ago.”

“That his physical body was destroyed does not necessarily mean he died,” said Shen Qingqiu. “He might have shed his shell and escaped.”

Liu Qingge raised one eyebrow. “Like you?”

Feeling guilty, Shen Qingqiu coughed. “Exactly.”

Liu Qingge didn’t pursue the topic. “So he escaped, and then?”

“Tianlang-Jun plans to merge the Demon and Human Realms.”

“You mean he plans to attack the Human Realm?”

Shen Qingqiu had known that most people would easily confuse these concepts. When you said “merge,” many people would assume you meant “unite,” but that actually wasn’t the case. What Tianlang-Jun planned to do with Xin Mo was the literal kind of “merge.”

The Demon and Human Realms were like two sides of the same sheet of paper, existing in two different dimensions. If you drew a line on one side of the paper, no matter how you extended it, you wouldn’t end up on the other side.

But Xin Mo could pierce the two sides of this sheet and render them one surface.

Let’s offer an example: The Human Realm mainland had a river called the Luo, and the Demon Realm had the Mai Gu Ridge. These two places were located in different dimensions. But in the original work, after Luo Binghe used Xin Mo as a key to merge the two realms, Mai Gu Ridge was patched into the center of the Luo River and became an isolated island.

After receiving this simple explanation, Liu Qingge furrowed his brow. “Such a thing is really possible?”

Of course. The original Luo Binghe succeeded at it! Shen Qingqiu nodded gravely.

Liu Qingge thought, then said, “This will have serious consequences. You’ll need more evidence to convince the sect leaders.”

If evidence was what he needed, he really didn’t have any. Shen Qingqiu was starting to get a headache when Luo Binghe, who had gone quiet for a while, suddenly spoke. “Why doesn’t Shizun ask me?”

Liu Qingge replied before Shen Qingqiu could with a, “Tsk.”

There were plenty of reasons for that “tsk.” Luo Binghe had demon blood, and he had long since dropped all pretenses with the sects. He was infamous across the land, and he had turned Huan Hua Palace into a straight-up heretic cult. Though its power had not weakened but grown under his hand, the other great sects had exiled the palace from their ranks, and its status as a “renowned righteous sect” was true only in name. Of course, in that case, Luo Binghe could be of no help. So there probably wasn’t any reason to ask him…

Though Shen Qingqiu understood this in his heart, he couldn’t say so too frankly. He didn’t know whether Luo Binghe’s fragile glass heart would subsequently shatter. He let out a few awkward laughs, but before he finished, a small bit of extra weight suddenly pressed against his back.

Luo Binghe’s head leaned lightly on his left shoulder.

Shen Qingqiu thought he was just acting cute again and tried to shake him off, but when he looked closer, Luo Binghe’s eyes were closed in peaceful sleep. He had fallen asleep while standing. *Weren’t you chatting perfectly fine just now?!*

Shen Qingqiu reached behind himself and took a firm hold of Luo Binghe’s arm to keep him from falling off the sword. “Luo Binghe?” he called quietly.

No reaction. After a pause, Shen Qingqiu used a lower and quieter voice. “Binghe?”

Only after being called twice did he slowly open his eyes. At the sight of his unfocused gaze, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t resist asking, “Are you really that tired?”

It was only a few days since the Holy Mausoleum, and even if the wounds Luo Binghe had suffered had healed quickly, they’d likely still left some lingering effects. Passing out now and then couldn’t be considered surprising.

Luo Binghe shook his head. “I’m not.”

Shen Qingqiu thought it over, then turned toward Liu Qingge, who was watching them with crossed arms and a cold gaze. “Liu-shidi, after we cross the borderlands, why don’t you go on ahead? Go back to Cang Qiong Mountain and summon the sects for a discussion with Zhangmen-shixiong and the others.”

Liu Qingge’s eyes widened slightly. “And you?”

“I may be back a bit later,” Shen Qingqiu said. “With Luo… With Binghe like this, the way I see it, it would be best to rest a bit before we continue.”

Liu Qingge drew a deep death. “I came to bring you back.”

Shen Qingqiu hesitated, while Luo Binghe didn’t say a word and only kept his head down, looking extremely docile.

“Just one night,” said Shen Qingqiu.

Liu Qingge looked at Luo Binghe tucked behind Shen Qingqiu’s back and snapped, “Not even a night.”

Then what could he do?

After another two hours, the trio crossed the borderlands and stopped before the largest inn in the city.

This city was far from the central plains. There were plenty of local miscellaneous sects, but such spirited and handsome personages with such lofty, awe-inspiring immortal demeanors were rarely seen—and three of them had shown up at once, each more handsome than the last. Quite a few people paused to observe. Liu Qingge lifted his chin and strode forward in long steps, Cheng Luan in hand, leading the way across the threshold.

The main hall was luxurious, spacious and bright, and a host immediately appeared to greet them.

"Liu-shidi, you're really going to stay with us?" asked Shen Qingqiu. He'd always had the feeling that Liu Qingge was the type to place himself above the troubles of the mortal world, who didn't need sleep at all—and even if he did sleep, he would do so on a spirit platform, veiled by lingering clouds.

Liu Qingge crossed his arms, sword in hand, and said icily, "I'm concerned."

When he looked up, he just managed to catch Luo Binghe silently scoffing behind Shen Qingqiu. Then Luo Binghe's gaze slid sideways, a disdainful smile on his lips, his gaze overflowing with malice. Enraged, the veins on the hand with which Liu Qingge held Cheng Luan began to pop.

At the sight of this, Shen Qingqiu hurriedly said, "If you have something to say, just say it. Don't get angry." Then he looked back, only to see Luo Binghe giving him an innocent blink, his lips still pale.

"Good customers, are you here to stay the night?" the host said with a smile.

Liu Qingge ignored the host, and Luo Binghe looked like he would fall over at any minute, so Shen Qingqiu could only take charge of the exchange himself. "That's right," he said."

"How many rooms?"

"Three," said Shen Qingqiu.

"Two rooms," said Luo Binghe.

Liu Qingge stopped just shy of writing "a wolf's treacherous ambitions deserve both hatred and execution" on his own face.

"Two rooms, please," Luo Binghe repeated pleasantly. "Thank you."

"Three rooms," said Liu Qingge.

Luo Binghe smiled. "May I ask who's paying?"

Both Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge froze.

There was no need to suggest Shen Qingqiu. He had just escaped a demon's lair; why would he have something like money? Liu Qingge was even more out of the question. This sort of great master, who was above the troubles of the mortal world, who had slaughtered his whole way here, would never have remembered to bring cash with him.

“It’s me,” Luo Binghe said deliberately. “And I didn’t bring enough money. So, two rooms.”

“Liu-shidi…don’t bicker with him,” said Shen Qingqiu.

There was no telling whether Luo Binghe had done this on purpose. By now, Shen Qingqiu really didn’t dare to assume. If money was the issue, there truly was no other way to resolve it. If they didn’t have the funds, they couldn’t just pawn off Xiu Ya or Cheng Luan, could they?

After retrieving the tokens for their rooms, Liu Qingge led the way upstairs as Shen Qingqiu walked in the middle. He turned and said helplessly, “If you anger your shishu again, next time I’m selling *you* for money.”

Luo Binghe looked up. “Shizun, you’re always so merciless with me.”

Ahead of them, Liu Qingge turned back and wrinkled his nose, looking like he wanted to hack these two degenerates to death, filled with enough disgust to bury one on a mountain peak and the other at the bottom of the ocean.

The two rooms were right next to each other, and the distribution of occupants was a serious problem.

Liu Qingge had his own considerations. Luo Binghe’s character and actions were uniformly bizarre, and an evil hung about him—he had embraced a corpse for five years! And now Luo Binghe was standing before him in the flesh. Could he just let him have his way?

Sparks seemed to crackle through the air.

Calm and unruffled, Shen Qingqiu opened a door, turned, and closed it behind him.

Then he suddenly opened it a crack and said solemnly, “Well, you two get some rest.”

The sparks froze into ice.

"Hey!" said Liu Qingge.

The space between Luo Binghe's brows practically darkened into a black cloud. "Shizun, he'll kill me."

Shen Qingqiu raised a finger at Liu Qingge. "Go ahead and fight. Just don't kill him."

Yeah right! Like he'd dare share a room with Luo Binghe. A straight man and a gay one staying in the same room? That was just asking for death.

Yes, Shen Qingqiu insisted he was still straight! His willingness to read a stallion novel like *Proud Immortal Demon Way* was rock-solid proof!

Nor did he dare to share a room with Liu Qingge. Though Great Master Liu was Cang Qiong Mountain's number one straight man across all space and time, so straight it was evident to all the heavens and earth, his straightness as certain a fact as the light of the sun and moon—if the demonic vinegar vat that was Luo Binghe overturned his sour contents,[5] he would be even harder to deal with.

For the above reasons, Shen Qingqiu happily said, "Then it's decided."

Luo Binghe was about to weep. "Shizun, how can you bear to do this?"

Shen Qingqiu chuckled and resolutely closed the door, leaving the other two petrified in the corridor, charred without and tender within.

He had decided to find someplace to rest because Luo Binghe looked tired and weak. But looking at him now, didn't he seem quite healthy? He'd worried for nothing!

After bathing, Shen Qingqiu changed into clean inner robes. Bored and with nothing to do, he spotted a few small, thin booklets stacked on the low table. Each had gaudy covers, and he couldn't really read the titles, but they were marked with numbers like "One," "Two," and "Three," so he pulled one out and leaned back against the headboard to read.

Skimming through the lines ten at a time, he found the text full of ornate prose and sentimental descriptions, and it even came with exquisite illustrations. Shen Qingqiu was about to take a closer look when that long-absent System notification came chirping at him.

Hello. Notification No. 1: Satisfaction points exceeded threshold. Drop conditions for key item achieved; please prepare to receive. If the item is not withdrawn during the drop period, it will expire.

A key item. That fake jade Guanyin that could reduce up to five thousand anger points?

Shen Qingqiu tossed the booklet in his hands aside. "Wait a minute. 'Satisfaction points exceeded threshold, drop conditions achieved for key item achieved'—are you saying that before, as I hadn't reached a certain amount of satisfaction points, the key item wasn't even usable?"

Correct.

Then what the hell had been the point of asking him whether he wanted to use it before? If he activated it without having met the prerequisite conditions, wouldn't he have had to use the Small Scenario Pusher anyway?!

And there wasn't really a use for the item anymore, was there? Shen Qingqiu sincerely believed that henceforth, even if he didn't get gay with Luo Binghe, as long as he didn't get gay with anyone else, the protagonist's anger points wouldn't explode. Even if he shoved Luo Binghe to the ground and tried to beat him to death, the only point value that would increase would be satisfaction…

Notification No. 2: High energy ahead.[6] ***An important quest is about to appear at Zhao Hua Monastery. Please be prepared to accept it. Have a good one.***

Version 2.0 even came with "high energy ahead" notifications!

Come to think of it, Luo Binghe had occasionally been exceedingly intimate with Shen Qingqiu, but his satisfaction points had never increased. Shen Qingqiu had been confused by this. This wasn't him being narcissistic, it was just that with Luo Binghe's sorry tendency of raking in satisfaction points from every single glare, scolding, or beating, it really was unscientific that they hadn't doubled by now. Had Shen Qingqiu just failed to hear or otherwise missed the notifications?

When he opened the System's database, the satisfaction points really hadn't increased by much. When he asked about this, the System said, ***Because the satisfaction points value has recently increased with excessive frequency, satisfaction points will be calculated monthly in order to conserve System resources. Have a good one.***

Calculated monthly? Shen Qingqiu had a premonition that it would be a terrifying number…

He was just about to ponder whether any important plot points occurred at Zhao Hua Monastery around this time when someone lightly knocked on his door.

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Chapter 18:
Origins

SHEN QINGQIU'S FIRST ASSUMPTION was that it was definitely Luo Binghe. But when the newcomer walked in, he realized that he had overestimated himself this time. The one who walked in was actually Liu Qingge.

Didn't Liu Qingge always prefer to walk straight in over the door after kicking it down? Since when had he learned to knock?!

In any case, the straight man could be allowed to come inside. Shen Qingqiu stepped aside to let him pass, closed the door, and asked, "Why has Liu-shidi come calling in the middle of the night? Where is Luo Binghe?"

Liu Qingge's face was stony. "I don't know!"

His expression said clearly that he'd rather sleep on the roof than share a room with the little beast.

Shen Qingqiu internally rolled with laughter. Liu Qingge shot him a glare, then reached into his lapels, pulled something out, and tossed it to him. Shen Qingqiu caught it and saw that it was one of the old folding fans he had left in Qing Jing Peak's Bamboo House.

Shen Qingqiu couldn't resist the urge to spread it with a sharp swish, and the resulting cool breeze immediately made him feel more lively and refreshed. A folding fan really was a deadly weapon when it came to acting badass—he could feel his B-Points explosively surging by the second!

Moved, he said, "Shidi, to think you remembered to bring this for Shixiong."

But of course Liu Qingge wasn't here just to give him the fan. He picked a stool and sat on it, ramrod-straight, placing only one arm on the table. "I have something to say to you."

Affected by his mood, Shen Qingqiu also grew serious and straightened his back.

"Exactly what is up with you and Luo Binghe?" asked Liu Qingge.

The Bai Zhan Peak Lord definitely wasn't asking this because he was looking to gossip. Shen Qingqiu considered his wording for a moment, then said sincerely, "I'm not sure myself. By the time I realized it, things had already become as they are."

"You sincerely believe he's changed his ways?"

"It's not so much that he's changed his ways as that I seem to have misunderstood him from the start."

Liu Qingge sneered. "Misunderstood? He forced you to self-detonate, tormented Huan Hua Palace, laid siege to Cang Qiong Mountain, burned and smashed Qiong Ding Hall, and injured Zhangmen-shixiong. Were these all misunderstandings?"

Upon hearing that last part, Shen Qingqiu immediately asked, "Is Zhangmen-shixiong all right? He looked to be injured last time. Has Mu-shidi treated him? Was it really Luo Binghe who did it?"

"Who else could it have been?" Liu Qingge spat. "Are you still looking for excuses for him? You've lost your senses!"

No. He wasn't looking for excuses for Luo Binghe. Rather, he was genuinely unsure as to whether Luo Binghe could injure Yue Qingyuan so easily.

It must be known that Luo Binghe and Yue Qingyuan had fought head-to-head several times in *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, and not once had Luo Binghe gotten the better of the sect leader. In the end, he had needed to use the original flavor Shen Qingqiu to drive that sect leader to his horrific death, pierced through by ten thousand arrows.

Come to think of it, in both the original work and in this world, Yue Qingyuan truly treated Shen Qingqiu unusually well. Shen Qingqiu had been perplexed by this since early in the novel; why did the great leader of a righteous sect bestow such favor on a scum villain of all people? Were there undiscovered hidden depths to this relationship? Would it be one of his plot hole-filling responsibilities?

Shen Qingqiu lowered his head, deep in thought, but Liu Qingge thought he was expressing shame after the scolding, and his face relaxed, his tone no longer so severe. "None of our comrades understand. Why are you so good to him?" Liu Qingge leaned forward just a bit, and the candlelight painted a layer of warmth over his snow-pale face. Tense, he asked, “Or to say, are those rumors true?”

The Shen Qingqiu who had believed Great Master Liu would scoff and turn up his nose at gossip was far too sweet and innocent. Shen Qingqiu’s hand clenched around his fan. “So Liu-shidi also believes that baseless hearsay?”

Liu Qingge straightened again. “I don’t. Yet you only care to blindly defend that traitor.”

“I’m not blindly defending him,” Shen Qingqiu said helplessly. “I just don’t want to misunderstand him again.”

“*I* don’t understand,” Liu Qingge said coldly. “Either way, mountains may crumble and rivers may shift, but fundamental nature is difficult to change. Luo Binghe is no good news; you’d better look out for yourself.”

After he finished, he got up and made to leave. Of course, Shen Qingqiu too knew that Luo Binghe was no good news, but at present, he couldn’t be certain that he was wicked either; it was still a headache.

Meanwhile, as Liu Qingge was about to walk out the door, he passed that low table and glanced down. His next step slipped out from under him, as if he had spotted something extraordinary.

Shen Qingqiu looked up. As Liu Qingge still hadn’t left, he sensed that something was off. “What is it?”

Liu Qingge stiffly turned his head and looked him up and down with the complicated gaze of someone seeing something entirely new. After a while, he shook his head, and only then did he open the door to leave. Within these short couple of steps, he seemed to even trip over the threshold.

What exactly is it?!

Shen Qingqiu snoozed away soundly all night. The next morning, half-dreaming and half-awake, he sensed someone else in the room. This person’s steps and movements both were incredibly light. When Shen Qingqiu opened his eyes, he immediately froze.

The only one who’d be interested in slipping into his room first thing in the morning was obviously Luo Binghe.

But it was a very different Luo Binghe. He had changed into a set of white robes, and his dark hair was neatly bound with a light-colored ribbon. Furthermore, he was hurrying about the room with a relaxed and contented expression.

His current attire and appearance was exactly identical to the Luo Binghe from before the Immortal Alliance Conference: t~~he model of a flawless and pure disciple of a major sect, the image of a pretty, diligent, and competent young wife,~~ it really…really…was…

Luo Binghe turned. At the sight of Shen Qingqiu propping himself up on one arm, he reached out a hand and said, all smiles, “Shizun is awake? Breakfast is on the table.”

Shen Qingqiu put a hand on his forehead, but his body reacted by itself to take Luo Binghe’s hand and get off the bed.

If he had to blame something, it would be that the scene before him was precisely the standard service he had received every morning back on Qing Jing Peak in days long past. The whole breadth of morning activities—getting up, getting dressed, washing, doing his hair, serving the meal, eating—was all naturally done under the auspice of Luo Binghe’s mindful service.

If the setting were changed to Qing Jing Peak’s Bamboo House, he really would have had the terrifying misconception that time was flowing backward!

“This inn’s breakfast is frankly unpalatable,” said Luo Binghe. “Shizun will have to settle.”

If it was to be compared with Luo Binghe’s handiwork, then this critique was very objective. Shen Qingqiu asked, “Where is your shishu?”

“I don’t know,” said Luo Binghe with a smile.

Whenever one of these two mentioned the other, it was with these blunt and simple three words. Shen Qingqiu pretty much got the idea: there was no point in asking. In a flash, Luo Binghe had gone to make his bed.

The devil incarnate, making his bed! This was too fantastical a vision; Shen Qingqiu didn’t dare watch.

Out of nowhere, Luo Binghe spoke again. “But, if Shizun is allowing me to call Liu Qingge ‘Shishu,’ that means he still acknowledges me as a disciple of Qing Jing Peak.”

Duh? How many times have you chased me around, calling Shizun this, Shizun that?

“Since when has this master said you were no longer his disciple?” asked Shen Qingqiu.

“I thought Shizun had tacitly driven me from the sect long ago,” said Luo Binghe as he folded the sheets. “I always chased after you, calling ‘Shizun,’ but in fact I was deeply afraid that it was just my one-sided wishful thinking.”

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t take it anymore. He covered his face. *Have some backbone, won’t you? Bing-ge!*

You’re the top-shelf stallion protagonist who once stood before his harem, oppressive presence overflowing as he cooly declared things like, “I do *have this many women, and there’s only going to be more. Deal with it or get lost.”*

Who exactly is this purehearted young man who serves tea, carries water, washes clothes, and folds blankets for someone, who bashfully speaks only when his back is turned? Huh? Who’s possessing your body?!

Shen Qingqiu finally had another opportunity to lecture his disciple. He drank a mouthful of tea, then said, “It’s very good that you think this way. Since you know you’re still a disciple of Qing Jing Peak, then you must not be as disrespectful as you have been to all your shishu and shibo—especially when we return to Cang Qiong Mountain today. You must give a proper apology for laying siege to the mountain and ruining the hall last time you were there.”

Of course he didn’t mean only a verbal apology. Luo Binghe would definitely have to pay the original construction cost for all the public facilities he had destroyed as compensation. This would be the bare mimnum to demonstrate sincerity!

Luo Binghe whisked away the breakfast dishes as he carelessly said, “There’s no need to return to Cang Qiong Mountain today.”

“Mm,” said Shen Qingqiu. “Hm? What did you say?”

“I said, if Shizun really wants to see all those…shishu and shibo, we don’t need to return to Cang Qiong Mountain. We can change directions and head straight to Zhao Hua Monastery.”

When the three words “Zhao Hua Monastery” left Luo Binghe’s mouth, the System sent a notification:

“Zhao Hua Monastery” quest officially issued! Issuer: Luo Binghe. Please select whether to accept!

The quest issuer was actually Luo Binghe himself? Shen Qingqiu squinted. “How do you know?”

“Won’t Shizun know if he goes?” asked Luo Binghe. “Meanwhile, Liu…Liu-shishu still hasn’t returned.”

Right after the words left his mouth, Liu Qingge arrived, kicking the door open with a bang. The door fell flat onto the ground, but Shen Qingqiu actually felt this was the style and entrance method that Liu Qingge should normally have, so his expression didn’t so much as flicker.

Liu Qingge didn’t spare Luo Binghe even a single glance as he said to Shen Qingqiu, “Change of plans. We’re not returning to Cang Qiong Mountain today—we’re going to Zhao Hua Monastery.”

Shen Qingqiu stood. “Did something happen?”

“Something happened,” Liu Qingge echoed gravely. “The news came after midnight last night. Today, the leaders of many sects are going to Zhao Hua Monastery on their invitation to discuss. Cang Qiong Mountain Sect is included. The cultivator families of this city have already made preparations and departed.”

On the way to Zhao Hua Monastery, they passed by Jin Lan City. It had been a few years, and who knew what this once-prosperous merchant capital looked like now after that calamity? If they hadn’t been in such a hurry, Shen Qingqiu would definitely have flown through the thick layer of clouds to take a look.

Not long after passing Jin Lan City, they arrived at Zhao Hua Monastery. The treasured monastery was dignified and stately, seated halfway up a verdant ancient mountain. This originally quiet and secluded old monastery was now a boiling cauldron of voices and darting silhouettes, and an unceasing parade of flying swords in formation poured in and out of the mountainside.

The trio stopped at the bottom of the flights of stone stairs leading to the Hall of Great Strength.[7]

“Come with me to see Zhangmen-shixiong,” Liu Qingge said to Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu was just about to nod when Luo Binghe also walked up to them. His status was special, and this was a rather sensitive situation, so Shen Qingqiu said, “Go lie low for a bit; don’t give those sect leaders the chance to point their spears at you.”

“If they want to point, they can,” said Luo Binghe, uncaring. “Of course I will go with Shizun.”

Once again, he was refusing to listen. If Shen Qingqiu really let him follow along and he was recognized, there would be a great deal of unnecessary trouble.

“Liu-shidi, you go first. I’ll come later,” said Shen Qingqiu.

Liu Qingge gave them a cold look before he flew up the stairs, heading off to rendezvous with Cang Qiong Mountain.

As long as he intentionally restrained his presence and adjusted his expression, Luo Binghe could make himself look harmless. Amidst the jostling crowd, he managed to appear to be a good, upright youth, albeit one with a somewhat excessively good-looking face—which made it difficult to avoid drawing attention. As for Shen Qingqiu, aside from his one rather unfortunate appearance in Jin Lan City, he had been buried in the ground and not shown his face for years, so the chance of him being recognized was even smaller.

The area outside the hall as well as the plaza were packed with rings and rings of people, forming a human wall. Before, the most numerous and arrogant among them would definitely have been the disciples of Huan Hua Palace, but now that Huan Hua Palace had become a heretic cult in all but name, they were naturally excluded. They hadn’t received an invitation in the first place, and not a single one of them was to be seen.

Several of Zhao Hua Monastery’s abbots presided over the occasion from the center of the Hall of Great Strength. Even Master Wu Chen was among them. Only when Shen Qingqiu looked closer did he discover that both of the man’s lower legs were wooden prosthetics, which allowed him to stand and walk as he once had.

Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, with Yue Qingyuan as its head, sat to the side of the hall, watching with a solemn and respectful gaze. Liu Qingge had just arrived to stand behind Yue Qingyuan and leaned down to whisper a few words in his ear. Yue Qingyuan’s expression stirred, and he inclined his head slightly, looking all around.

Beside Master Wu Chen was the head of Zhao Hua Monastery, Abbot Wu Wang. This old monk, beard and brows peppered with white, pressed his palms together, his low, deep voice echoing throughout the hall loud and clear.

“This old monk will ask outright: All who are present, how many of you had that same dream last night?”

Dream?

Needless to say, this was Luo Binghe’s doing!

Said perpetrator whispered in Shen Qingqiu’s ear, “Wasn’t Shizun fretting about not having ‘evidence’? You don’t need to worry anymore now, do you?”

No wonder Luo Binghe had fallen asleep for a moment on Xiu Ya. To think Shen Qingqiu had even thought he was running out of energy! Turned out that at the time, he was actually activating his dream powers.

Luo Binghe’s eyes brimmed with “Compliments, please!” and “Head pats, please!” However, Shen Qingqiu was coming down with a headache wondering what exactly Luo Binghe had crafted in the dream he distributed. How had he communicated a situation so dire that all these people would scurry to Zhao Hua Monastery for this serious discussion…?

He didn’t even need to ask, as someone else got impatient first. “Could someone say exactly what this dream was?”

This person looked quite familiar. Shen Qingqiu thought for a moment and suddenly remembered. Wasn’t it that person from Hua Yue

City? That… What sect was it again? Oh, the Ba Qi Sect, the Ba Qi Sect's da-shixiong!

Master Wu Chen said politely, "May we ask this Sect Leader, what is your cultivation level?"

"Late Core Formation!"

The two abbots looked at each other, and quite a few people began to quietly cough.

Amidst the silence, Master Wu Chen was the one to hint at what was going unsaid. "Then…that is strange. Within our monastery, everyone with cultivation from Core Formation and up had the same dream…"

What he didn't say was that if this fellow really was at Late Core Formation, by all rights, he should have had the dream too.

A chorus of agreements came from below.

"That's right, all the members of our sect below Core Formation were likewise unaffected last night."

Lying about your cultivation to everyone's face and being exposed on the spot—this really was lifting a stone and dropping it on your own foot. Shen Qingqiu internally lit a candle for this good brother who still hadn't made a bit of progress even after so many years.

However, although that shixiong's cultivation hadn't advanced much, his face had grown much thicker. He wasn't the least bit embarrassed and instead said in a loud voice, "There are exceptions to every rule! Just tell us: Exactly what was the dream?"

This Ba Qi Sect had such a tyrannical name, yet they were actually without a single Core Formation cultivator. Otherwise he wouldn't need to ask about it in front of such an audience. It looked like this guy wasn't here because he'd been invited to the discussion but simply to get in on the action and make himself known.

Wu Wang furrowed his brow, but Master Wu Chen was a good-natured person, and he patiently explained the general outline. "The contents of the dream were that Tianlang-Jun, who has been sealed under Bai Lu Mountain, had recrafted a corporeal body to unleash a storm of carnage…"

Though Master Wu Chen was elegant in his choice of words and metaphors, and had redacted some of the contents, with Luo Binghe's tastes, the "storm of carnage" he spoke of would absolutely not have been limited to simple killings and beatings. The monk had definitely left out some heavier types of play…

"If one or two people had the same dream, one could call it an oddity," said Wu Wang. "But if several hundred people have the same dream at the same time, even calling it miraculous would not explain it away. In addition, this dream was no ordinary sort. It was incredibly realistic, and upon waking, one felt that even the waking world was not as real as that of the dream."

All the cultivators present who had reached Core Formation or greater empathized with this description; their hearts still palpitated at the memory, and they all nodded in agreement.

"Why was this Tianlang-Jun sealed?" one person asked, confused. "If he really was so horrific, how was he overcome last time?"

Master Wu Chen sighed. "The tale truly is an injustice. If the Palace Master of Huan Hua Palace were here today, who knows how greatly he would lament?"

"The Palace Master of Huan Hua Palace?" a woman said, surprised. "What does this have to do with Luo Binghe?"

Her voice was clear, crisp, and charming, melodious like a warbler's song, and Shen Qingqiu turned to look at the sound. The one who spoke was a slender and beautiful Daoist nun from Tian Yi Temple.

Shen Qingqiu couldn't tell exactly which one she was, because there were three Daoist nuns who looked like they had been carved from the same mold, from their faces to their figures and attire. Standing together, they looked like three bright and lovely blue flowers. Even their faces wore identical expressions of strange, unspeakable excitement. That's right, it was definitely excitement.

The triplet sisters from the original Bing-ge's harem. *Long time no see, harem members!*

Before, Shen Qingqiu would definitely have been beyond himself with excitement; then he would have begun envisioning the passage to follow, where the protagonist bedded his women, all while hypocritically roasting Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky. But now…

Luo Binghe lowered his voice to its quietest, but the sourness in his tone wafted as far as ten kilometers away. “Shizun, are they pretty?”

Ah, forget it. Shen Qingqiu looked back away. The plot had been changed into something unrecognizable, and those three Daoist nuns hadn’t become Luo Binghe’s extraction vessels. At this time, they shouldn’t have been acquainted with Luo Binghe, yet they still showed interest in news about him. Shen Qingqiu automatically assumed the excitement on their faces was the first stirring of affection. Luo Binghe’s stallion powers were still going strong!

“Amitabha Buddha. The Palace Master I speak of is the previous one,” said Master Wu Wang. “That Luo Binghe merely used underhanded methods to usurp the seat of leadership. By what merits has he earned recognition as Palace Master from the masses?”

Luo Binghe raised his eyebrow and twisted his lips in disdain.

Master Wu Wang continued. “But indeed, the real story cannot escape association with Huan Hua Palace. Tens of years ago, the head disciple under the Old Palace Master’s tutelage was named Su Xiyan.”

Shen Qingqiu’s spirits picked up at this. At this rate, they were about to unravel the riddle of Luo Binghe’s origins!

“This woman had unparalleled talent, was keen and intelligent, and was decisive in her actions, with a lordly presence. The Old Palace Master especially loved and valued this direct disciple of his, and he saw her as the apple of his eye. The entire sect tacitly recognized her as the next master of Huan Hua Palace. No matter where he went, he ordered Su Xiyan to accompany him and serve at his side. He regarded her most highly.”

Shen Qingqiu recalled the Old Palace Master’s blank-eyed, drooling appearance in the Holy Mausoleum and thought to himself, *Did he see her as the pearl in his palm or a slab of meat for his exclusive use?*

Not a sound was heard in the Hall of Great Strength except for Master Wu Wang’s resonant voice.

“One day, the Old Palace Master and Su Xiyan accepted a request to subdue a monstrous beast. On the way back to the palace, they passed through an old city at the lower reaches of the Luo River. Demons and monsters were on a rampage, and few survivors remained in the surrounding cities, but while investigating, Su Xiyan met a young man traveling alone.

“The young man had a unique presence, and his features and the color of his skin were extraordinary. He sat below a draping willow, playing and singing a song. Such a character should not have appeared in such a location at such a time, and Su Xiyan immediately sensed something strange. After exchanging a few questions, she became certain this person was peculiar, that he was definitely no common sort.”

Shen Qingqiu was engrossed by the tale. So Tianlang-Jun really had been a youth of literature who loved the human world’s poems, songs, and prose since he was young. And what was the most terrifying variety of such youths? The kind that was both cultured and *handsome*. The following script was very easy to predict. As long as his singing wasn’t too much of a letdown, love at first sight was definitely at hand.

Who knew that the plot would take an abrupt turn for the worse, slapping him right across the face!

“Su Xiyan immediately reported this to her shizun. The Old Palace Master was more alarmed the more he thought about it. As the youth showed interest in Su Xiyan, conversation came easily to them, so the Old Palace Master decided to meet like with like. He commanded her to approach the youth and investigate his background. Su Xiyan was quite adept at this, and she easily discovered that this man was the leader of the demon nobility, the one who had united both the northern and southern territories, Tianlang-Jun.”

Shen Qingqiu had thought it would be boy meets girl, girl meets boy—he never imagined it would be fantasy *Infernal Affairs*!

It wasn’t the overused trope of “tall, dark, and deadly demonic Saintly Ruler meets pure and charming little white flower,” it was actually “pure and naive ruler who doesn’t know the treachery of the human heart steps out into the world for the first time and meets the pillar of a righteous sect, a cool and calculating overlord of a flower with a dark side.”

Shen Qingqiu finally understood what meaning underlay Tianlang-Jun's wry tone when he'd spoken of Su Xiyan, that half mocking, half adoring "cold and heartless."

"As the Old Palace Master had Su Xiyan maintain her rapport with Tianlang-Jun, he also sent people to follow and observe them in secret. But the disciples he sent always lost them, so the Old Palace Master could only take to the field himself. Finally, his efforts bore fruit, and he discovered Tianlang-Jun's motives for wandering the Human Realm. For one day, Su Xiyan and Tianlang-Jun met on Bai Lu Mountain. There they sat shoulder to shoulder atop the head of a giant green snake, speaking in low voices."

If Shen Qingqiu hadn't guessed wrong, that giant green snake was Zhuzhi-Lang. It could only be Zhuzhi-Lang. Whether as a nephew or as a subordinate, being taken along on a date as a cushion was really the most pitiful thing!

"Afraid to alarm Tianlang-Jun, the Old Palace Master stopped a distance away, but he faintly overheard their words. Su Xiyan patiently guided the conversation, probing from all sorts of oblique directions, before she finally got Tianlang-Jun to forget himself for a moment and unintentionally reveal why he had infiltrated the human world—he would bathe the cultivation world in blood and pillage the hidden treasures kept by each sect to build the demon race's might!"

When the last part was spoken, a tidy chorus of inhales sounded from the crowd. But Shen Qingqiu did a spit-take.

To be frank, this kind of content, which followed the standard logic of a final boss, just didn't fit Tianlang-Jun's style. No matter how Shen Qingqiu thought about it, that guy didn't seem very much like the sort of character who'd speak such haughty lines of conquest and wild ambition. In addition, as their supreme ruler, Tianlang-Jun could enter the demon race's Holy Mausoleum whenever he wished. That place contained more treasures than one could ever take, let alone use. If he was bored, he could even set up a booth and play ring toss for fun. Did they really think he would care about the handful of hidden treasures possessed by the four major sects?

In Shen Qingqiu's opinion, this account was full of red flags.

But Master Wu Wang continued his account in a flat tone, "After obtaining this information, the Old Palace Master immediately informed all the great sects in secret. Tianlang-Jun and Su Xiyan met at Bai Lu Mountain two times a month, so the sects decided that they would join together to besiege Tianlang-Jun on the date of their next meeting.

"As for the rest, that was the Battle of Bai Lu Mountain. The events of that day would be best told by Sect Leader Yue, who participated in the fight."

Yue Qingyuan nodded. "In truth, there is not much to be said about the battle that day. Tianlang-Jun never expected that he would be met not by Su Xiyan but a full assault. He only brought one of the demon generals under his command, the one called Zhuzhi-Lang. After being surrounded, he was defeated and captured."

If so, their side had won by the unfair advantage of numbers. But Yue Qingyuan gave an honest account and neither hid nor embellished the sequence of events. However, many present had grown up listening to their sect's seniors brag about the Battle of Bai Lu Mountain, so they were hearing the true version for the first time. Some felt awkward, and some were angry.

Yue Qingyuan said, "In order to protect his master, Zhuzhi-Lang was struck head-on by my shizun's spiritual artifact and transformed back into his original shape. He fled as half-snake. Meanwhile, Tianlang-Jun was sealed beneath Bai Lu Mountain."

So Zhuzhi-Lang had been blasted into the snake-man form he'd worn in the Dew Mushroom cave by a bolt of heavenly lightning from the hand of the previous Qiong Ding Peak Lord. With his black-and-white sense of gratitude and grievances, along with his need to repay every slight…

Before Shen Qingqiu could continue thinking about it, the System beeped with a notification.

Quest issued! Please help "Luo Binghe" complete the "Zhao Hua Monastery" scenario. Objective: Raise righteous image points by at least 200!

Righteous image points?

Shen Qingqiu had a flash of realization; he finally remembered what plot point occurred at Zhao Hua Monastery.

To explain this, one must mention Sha Hualing’s dad, Jiuchong-Jun. After this unfortunate demon noble had been screwed out of his territory by his own traitorous daughter, he wandered about the southern border for some time and gathered a crowd of rabble, hoping to stage a return to power and take revenge on Luo Binghe. But as he was going up against the protagonist’s diamond-hard halo, he could forget about accomplishing either one of these beautiful dreams within this lifetime…

Jiuchong-Jun’s plans failed again and again, so of course he grew frustrated. And what would he do with this frustration? Find someone else to vent it on, of course! So, he decided to make Zhao Hua Monastery this “someone else”…

Placed next to Sha Hualing’s initial attack on Qiong Ding Peak, these actions were curiously similar in essence, despite the different perpetrator. It was the same naive arrogance, the same method of digging their graves. Shen Yuan had roasted it back when he was reading. No wonder they were father and daughter—their trains of thought careened off on the same weird tracks.

In the original work, because Jiuchong-Jun sent a bunch of miscellaneous fighters to harass the civilians and monks in Zhao Hua Monastery’s vicinity, Zhao Hua Monastery held a conference not to deal with Tianlang-Jun, but to clean up these annoying and dispossessed demons clamoring for attention.

But the reason for the conference wasn’t important. The important part was that Zhao Hua Monastery was indeed an opportunity for Luo Binghe to farm righteous image points.

In the original, Jiuchong-Jun’s demon underlings infiltrated the human crowd and found every opportunity to cause trouble, wanting to “stick it to those bald donkeys” (their words). But they had barely a few seconds for mischief before they were beautifully and unconditionally subjugated by Luo Binghe. With such a development, the current Luo Binghe would of course be able to gain some righteous image points. At least he could go from “beyond redemption” to “neither black nor white.”

Shen Qingqiu discreetly glanced around. Sure enough, he discovered a few “people” within the crowd whose expressions weren’t quite right. Very good, the props were ready to take their place!

The three beautiful Daoist nuns had originally been important characters in this section. With the collaborative efforts from Luo Binghe's harem in the original story, the efficiency of his righteous image farming had of course been even higher. But now they had totally become bystanders in the crowd.

In conclusion: So the female lead's role was going to Shen Qingqiu again, huh?

"In that dream, Tianlang-Jun used a recrafted body to slaughter his way through the Human Realm, plunging all who lived into utter misery," Wu Wang said severely. "This old monk believes that was his threat to us—an omen of his revenge for the Battle of Bai Lu Mountain!"

"But Tianlang-Jun's original body has already been destroyed," someone said. "Even if he wants revenge, he shouldn't be anything to fear, right?"

"You mustn't underestimate Tianlang-Jun," said Wu Wang. "The demon race recognizes him as the strongest heir of the heavenly demon bloodline; with no equal across all past generations. In addition, his subordinates include not only his capable and loyal general, Zhuzhi-Lang—who has already recovered his own body—but a son."

Shocked and horrified, everyone began whispering into one another's ears.

"Su Xiyan actually had a son with him?"

"Who is it?"

"Wasn't she ordered to only feign cordiality toward Tianlang-Jun? How can this be?!"

Some individuals had found another, more particular point of focus, and were considering the question of reproductive compatibility.

"Can humans and demons really have children?"

"We look about the same, so it's probably possible."

"Su Xiyan may have approached Tianlang-Jun in the name of her master," said Wu Wang, "but how could she successfully win his trust without using herself as bait? This one believes that she was originally capable of maintaining clear boundaries. However, demons are adept in the art of bewitching human hearts, and a perfect defense against such things is impossible. One small slip, one moment of carelessness, and she fell into the demon's trap. A single false step became a lifetime's worth of regrets. By the time we'd conceived the campaign, she must already have been pregnant. As for their child, you all are intimately familiar with him. He is the one who we just spoke of: the impostor in Huan Hua Palace, the cuckoo who roosts in the warbler's nest! Luo Binghe!"

As soon as Wu Wang said this, the whispers in the hall immediately surged like the tide, building into a towering wave.

Shen Qingqiu couldn't help himself and stealthily glanced at Luo Binghe.

In the beginning, Luo Binghe had even been in the mood to joke around, content to stand and listen. But the more he heard, the more severe he became. Now his smile faded entirely, and there was a pallor to his face. Yet his eyes were frigid, colder than a blizzard-choked wasteland.

Yue Qingyuan's knuckles slowly brushed along Xuan Su's hilt. "I was able to meet Senior Su Xiyan once at an Immortal Alliance Conference, many years ago. Luo Binghe's appearance is seven-tenths identical to his mother's. At first I, too, thought it was only a coincidence, as many people in this world look alike. However, since he is half-heavenly demon by blood, it's difficult to take it as mere happenstance."

The man from the Ba Qi Sect interrupted again. "If it was done against her will, then we can't blame her. But since she must have known the child was a demon, why give birth to him at all?"

Others immediately followed up.

"That's right, if Su Xiyan hadn't given birth to him, how could there be a Luo Binghe?"

"Why didn't she abort that evil fetus?"

"How horrifically shameful, really too shameful! No wonder I've never heard mention of the name Su Xiyan before. Naturally a scandal of this magnitude would be covered up and concealed. If someone from our sect committed the same sin, we'd commit suicide on the spot. How else could we face our master?"

Upon hearing this, Master Wu Chen looked like he had something to say, but he only lightly shook his head. “Originally, this matter concerned a woman’s reputation, and moreover, Benefactor Su has already passed away,” he said at last. “If not for the extraordinary circumstances of the present, these events would never have been revealed. But they simply cannot be hidden any longer. A demon’s blood is powerful and potent, and a mother’s life is intertwined with that of her fetus’s; an abortion at that point would have been highly dangerous… As a deeply proud person, Benefactor Su couldn’t accept this, and she was even less willing to tolerate the dubious looks of outsiders. So the Old Palace Master brewed her a drug that was harmful to demons. After drinking it, she left Huan Hua Palace, and from then on, no one knew what became of her… My Lord Buddha is merciful; this one asks everyone to abstain from harsh words and the karma they bring.”

Luo Binghe’s face was devoid of expression, but his fingers unconsciously clenched and relaxed several times.

Near where he and Shen Qingqiu were standing, someone said, “Refusing to acknowledge the lover she’d had relations with and utterly merciless to her own flesh and blood. What a coldhearted yet truly incredible woman.”

“Indeed, if only her fortune had been slightly better and she hadn’t fallen under that fiend’s spell. With such a profound accomplishment and a promising future, she would have become an extraordinary person of great renown by now.”

“No matter how profound her accomplishment, she coupled with a demon and conceived such a monster… Ugh, the mere thought is disgusting! I wouldn’t want that kind of accomplishment even if it were offered to me on a platter.”

“I fear Su Xiyan also felt too ashamed to face anyone. That’s why she left her sect and renounced her apprenticeship.”

Suddenly, the man from the Ba Qi Sect said, “This means that from beginning to end, the campaign against Tianlang-Jun was driven by neither evidence nor incident? It was all based on a couple of things the Old Palace Master said about the fellow?”

The main hall instantly fell silent, devoid of a single titter.

As if completely unaware, the man continued. “I’m only asking, you can just listen or not, ha. However, do you really feel that you were in the right, launching that kind of campaign based only on the Old Palace Master’s side of the story? Why do I feel that from start to end, Tianlang-Jun did only one thing, which was to be tricked by his lover? You even made that young woman approach a dangerous person from a foreign race and *ordered* her to trick him. Then you forced her to abort her child via poison, and in the end made her leave her sect heavy with regrets. I don’t find this at all commendable. Our Ba Qi Sect has never behaved in such a manner, and we would never encourage it.”

With this remark, a slight unexpected surprise bloomed within Shen Qingqiu. Given how tone-deaf this good brother had always been, he really wouldn’t have guessed that this time the man would actually manage to say something so reasonable in his tone-deafness. It seemed his IQ was a notch or two higher than the average side character’s.

It was Wu Wang who broke this short period of silence. His white eyebrows furrowed, then he pressed his palms together and rebuked the man. “These words are beyond foolish! Since ancient times, the demons’ invasions into and massacres within the Human Realm have gone on unceasing. Should we have waited for Tianlang-Jun to legitimately start butchering us to know regret, once it was too late? Besides, as a leader in charge of one of the four major sects, how would the Old Palace Master benefit from maliciously deceiving the cultivation world? Moreover, the existence of a seed of evil born of relations with a demon is even less permissible! What’s detestable is the sheer power of that fiend’s life force—to the point that even taking that drug wasn’t enough to destroy the fetus!”

Wu Wang spoke these words with overflowing righteousness, and applause and exclamations of approval instantly followed.

Master Wu Chen wore an expression like he couldn’t bear to listen. He brought his palms together and began chanting sutras.

It wasn’t that no one found the idea cruel. But after hearing Wu Wang’s speech, the crowd was deeply affected and invigorated by the mood, and so their thoughts changed. That fetus was Luo Binghe, after all. What was there to sympathize with? And so they too began to cheer and applaud.

Luo Binghe's lashes lowered. It was impossible to tell if he was listening or if his mind was wandering. The past few days, the figure he cut had gradually thawed. Now it froze over once more, a new layer of frost crystallizing on top.

At present, people within the Hall of Great Strength were gnashing their teeth over his miraculous survival while cheering for his hypothetical death as a fetus. Yet Luo Binghe acted like he couldn't hear a single thing.

If the plotline had unfolded in an ideal manner, the progression here should have been like so: The sect leaders solemnly discuss how to deal with Tianlang-Jun. → Suddenly, demons aiming to cause chaos appear. → Luo Binghe single-handedly takes care of the demon lurkers, farming righteous image points and favor. But because a bunch of gossipy hens had talked and talked, Luo Binghe's backstory had been dug up. This had caused the focus of the narrative to deviate from the original.

Shen Qingqiu watched the silent Luo Binghe. Suddenly, he was struck with regret. He should never have taken this Zhao Hua Monastery quest.

Master Wu Chen sighed. "Must you put it that way? Benefactor Su, ah, Benefactor Su. As she was a lone woman wandering about the outside world, the Old Palace Master sent many to search for her fruitlessly for years. No one knows how much suffering she endured before the end. And though Luo Binghe is half-heavenly demon by blood, previously, he too never caused any unspeakable harm or evil…"

"Don't confuse yourself over who deserves kindness, Shidi," said Wu Wang. "Recall the extent of what they forced you to endure at Jin Lan City and you will understand just how sinister and evil a demon's intentions can be. When dealing with demons, you must extinguish them before the sprouts take root. That is the correct strategy. This father and son have conspired against us for a long time already. They've joined hands for their return in a vain attempt to destroy us. Indulging them isn't kindness but a woman's foolish softness! It will only result in horrors beyond what unfolded in that dream realm!"

This Wu Wang's cultivation might have been pretty good, but he really had too much pent-up anger. Other than his lack of hair, there wasn't much Buddha in him at all. Rather than taking up a staff and becoming an abbot, he should have taken up an axe and become Li Kui.[8]

By contrast, Wu Chen’s martial abilities were only so-so, but he was gentle and kind, so he was even more deserving of the title of “Master.” Even after this scolding, his expression didn’t change, much less his tune. “Joined hands to conspire? But such a thing…might not be the case.”

The two abbots from Zhao Hua Monastery squabbled over this without any breakthroughs until Yue Qingyuan interrupted them. “Regardless of whether they’ve joined hands, one point is absolute: I’m afraid Luo Binghe is no good news.” He raised his voice. “Qingqiu, are you still lurking?”

The hair on Shen Qingqiu’s back stood up, and he dithered for a few seconds. Only then did he slowly walk forward.

He felt like a grade-schooler who the teacher had called on for a reprimand, and the underside of his face prickled faintly. Luckily, he was quite thick-skinned and shameless, maintaining perfect poise as he bowed. “Zhangmen-shixiong.”

Now that the focus was on him, the person beside him was even more impossible to conceal.

“Luo Binghe!” someone immediately called out in shock. “It’s Luo Binghe!”

“It really is him! When did he manage to get in?!”

“Shen Qingqiu’s here too. He really isn’t dead?!”

“Back at Hua Yue City, I saw him self-detonate with my own eyes…”

The majority of the exclamations had the tone of those who’d seen an evil spirit, yet mixed in with them were the delicate voices of several women. These belonged to the three beautiful nuns from Tian Yi Temple, who clutched each other’s arms, their faces suffused with an unnatural flush. The strange part was that some of the flushing seemed to be directed at Shen Qingqiu…

Remaining seated, Yue Qingyuan looked at him. “A lot of nonsense you’ve stirred up these days,” he said mildly. “Are you done?”

Yue Qingyuan had never assumed such a severe attitude when speaking to him before, even going so far as to use a word like “nonsense.” This was already the equivalent of a flogging. It seemed that Liu Qingge had badmouthed him quite thoroughly.

Shen Qingqiu swore that one day he’d steal Cheng Luan and use it to chop all the pork hock in all the kitchens of the Twelve Peaks. He’d chop until the oily sheen smothered all its sword glares!

Get the plot back on track—let’s get it back on track, okay? Can you guys please direct your attention to the demons hiding within the temple?! How are we supposed to farm righteous image points like this?!

Shen Qingqiu was about to meddle a little and draw everyone’s attention to the lurkers’ suspicious features—currently they were disguised as disciples from miscellaneous sects—when Wu Wang viciously slammed his staff against the ground. “Luo Binghe, to think you’d delivered yourself to our doorstep,” he said with a sneer. “This simplifies matters. Why not say it outright? When does Tianlang-Jun intend to commit the deeds he performed within the dream realm?”

“What do the things he wants to do have to do with me?” Luo Binghe asked coldly.

Someone else grunted. “The two of you are father and son, and you ask what this has to do with you?”

Luo Binghe was indifferent. “He’s not my father.”

“A mountain of ironclad evidence sits before you, and still you deny it? Do you take everyone here for toddlers?” said Wu Wang.

Luo Binghe shook his head. It was unclear what he was stubbornly clinging to, but he repeated, “He’s not my father.”

Wu Wang humphed. “Truly, good never lasts long, while curses and calamities are undying. If only Su Xiyan had gotten rid of you back then, things would have been perfect!”

These words were truly too vicious. Luo Binghe’s breathing seemed to stop for a moment, and a bloodred light flashed faintly within his eyes. Shen Qingqiu couldn’t afford to give it more thought. He immediately grabbed his hand.

Liu Qingge was standing behind Yue Qingyuan with his arms crossed. When he saw Shen Qingqiu move to hold Luo Binghe’s hand in full view of the crowd, a vein popped out on his forehead. “Hey!”

Whenever Liu Qingge was enraged but also unwilling to say more, his go-to expression was always a fierce, aggressive “hey.” However, it was completely impotent as a deterrent, so Shen Qingqiu simply ignored it. Luo Binghe having an episode in this kind of situation wouldn’t be fun at all. It wasn’t only an issue of whether he would be able to farm favor. The main problem lay in this Zhao Hua Monastery subplot being highly difficult to brute-force one’s way through.

If one used spiritual energy, one would be pitting their power against hundreds of others, and if one used demonic qi, one would be facing Zhao Hua Monastery, whose barrier adepts were as numerous as the clouds in the sky. Sealing demons was their specialty. Moreover, attempting a brute-force solution meant falling to an IQ on par with Team Sha Hualing and Her Father.

“Who is this Su Xiyan?” Luo Binghe asked coldly. “My mother was a mere washerwoman.”

“Wu Wang’s report isn’t the whole story, and you know very well the kind of person the Old Palace Master was,” Shen Qingqiu said quietly. The tone he used was that of someone instructing his disciple, doing his best to remain calm and objective. “When it comes to these old affairs, those two might well have embellished the tale, and their trustworthiness is suspect. So wipe them clean from your mind!”

Luo Binghe clutched his arm. “Shizun, Tianlang-Jun isn’t my father.” His words sounded like both a plea and a declaration. “I don’t need a father.”

Shen Qingqiu didn’t know what to say. He only squeezed Luo Binghe’s hand tighter, hinting that he ought to compose himself first.

Originally, Luo Binghe’s backstory hadn’t been exposed in such detail, so Shen Qingqiu had been unable to judge how deeply this would strike him. He feared it wasn’t something a few comforting lines and a couple of head pats could resolve.

The faint hopes and dreams Luo Binghe had held in his heart for many years had been mercilessly pulverized into so much dust. Neither father nor son were willing to act the part. Being a pure-blooded demon, Tianlang-Jun was already indifferent to the concept of parental bonds. After his suffering at the hands of Su Xiyan and other humans, his hatred had extended even to Luo Binghe. He refused to speak a single word of their relationship and had been utterly ruthless back in the Holy Mausoleum. On top of that, Su Xiyan's decisions with regard to her son and his father painted an even clearer picture: deception, exploitation, disgust, rejection—treating them as her shame. Abandonment.

To his parents, Luo Binghe was an unwanted child.

Wu Wang frowned. "To think you would have the gall to say such words. As expected of a demon."

Luo Binghe turned a deaf ear to him. "If he was my father, why didn't he bring it up earlier? Why not tell me?"

The most Tianlang-Jun had said was that single line he offered while beating up Luo Binghe, devoid of either praise or criticism: "He looks like his mother."

He looks like his mother. What of it?

But that was all. There was nothing more.

Shen Qingqiu couldn't find the words to say. From his point of view, the most likely explanation for this…was probably that Tianlang-Jun really did have some mental issues?

But the atmosphere wasn't right, and Shen Qingqiu hadn't the mind to do a thorough roast. He turned and said, "I ask everyone to calm themselves a little. Luo Binghe did not come to Zhao Hua Monastery today for the sake of provocation, nor does he harbor evil intentions…"

"Indeed," Master Wu Chen agreed. "I ask Shixiong to first lend Peak Lord Shen an ear."

Shen Qingqiu sent him a grateful glance, but Wu Wang sneered.

"Not harboring evil intentions, you say?" Wu Wang raised his voice and yelled, "Then what are those?"

From the crowd emerged ten or so warrior monks, dressed in red-gold robes with a bunch of people already in their grasp. They pressed their captives to the floor, and billows of black qi fanned from the victims. The scene very logically erupted.

“Demons have managed to breach the temple!” to the nth power.

“Luo Binghe really did come prepared!” to the nth power.

What a fucking development!

Jiuchong-Jun’s hodgepodge subordinates were supposed to be Luo Binghe’s tools for farming favor, but now everything had completely backfired: they’d been mistaken for an ambush in league with Luo Binghe!

With great insight, Shen Qingqiu pulled out his fan right in time to meet a heavy staff blow from Wu Wang. With a slight raise of his fan arm, Shen Qingqiu blocked the staff mid-strike, keeping it aloft. He was very careful about his level of force, ensuring it was just enough to create a stalemate with Wu Wang. With this, he managed to spare Luo Binghe a backward glance and a rushed line: “Leave it to this master.”

He was about to say more words suitable to the occasion when Wu Wang rebuked him. “Shen Qingqiu, don’t end up like Su Xiyan, with your heart led astray due to a moment’s carelessness, resulting in a lifetime of regrets! As a peak lord, you should know some shame!”

Shen Qingqiu’s feet almost slipped out from under him, and his expression couldn’t help but twist a little. How was his situation the same?!

He’d just managed to right his expression when Luo Binghe sent a palm strike at Wu Wang.

Shen Qingqiu channeled spiritual energy into the tip of his fan, blasting away the staff’s next blow. “Didn’t I just say, ‘leave it to me’?”

Luo Binghe’s expression was dark and clouded. “He can say whatever he likes about me, but not about you!”

In the span of this exchange, they’d already been surrounded by the cultivators in the main hall, all dressed in various colors. Sure enough, the moment Luo Binghe used demonic qi, hostilities erupted with marked celerity.

Wu Wang waved his staff. “Sect Leader Yue, this fiend still addresses Shen Qingqiu as his shizun, and Shen Qingqiu has yet to repudiate him either. What is your view? Do you still recognize Luo Binghe as a member of Cang Qiong Mountain?”

Yue Qingyuan didn’t answer, and his face appeared without emotion, devoid of joy, sorrow, pleasure, or anger. His voice too was steady, its pitch neither rising nor falling as he remained calmly seated. “Shidi, come back.”

Shen Qingqiu unconsciously took a step toward him. He thought to himself that he should first admit his wrongdoings and pacify the chief a little. If Yue Qingyuan could come over to their side, they could definitely keep this situation under control.

But before he could head over, Luo Binghe grabbed him. “Don’t go!” He repeated himself again, “Don’t go.” Within his tone was a hint of desperate pleading.

Shen Qingqiu hadn’t managed to answer when hundreds of sword glares were sent careening toward where they were surrounded in the center of the crowd.

Liu Qingge’s pupils shrank, and Cheng Luan left its sheath in answer. Suddenly, tremors shook the entire main hall. A dome of light, arcing with sparks of black and white lightning, exploded.

When the tremors ceased, people lay strewn all across the floor. Roughly only one-in-four remained either standing or leaning on support. Luo Binghe’s eyes were now red, their glow brighter than daylight, as if either searing lava or crimson blood would flow forth from them at any moment. His lapels and sleeves billowed with a black qi that roiled without pause.

The demons pressed against the floor burst into laughter.

“You old-timers are indeed shameless, ganging up on someone like that! You actually have the audacity to use the same underhanded method you turned on Tianlang-Jun!”

“Not just using it, you have to be all self-righteous about it too. Ha!”

Luo Binghe held Shen Qingqiu with one arm. “I am a demon, so go ahead and attack me altogether,” he said, enunciating each word clearly. “I don’t care. But what has my shizun done to be attacked together with me?”

In truth, Shen Qingqiu had suffered no injuries. The tremors had been violent enough to make him stumble, but Luo Binghe had immediately grabbed him, pulling him into the crook of his arm and thereby protecting him. He wanted to continue mediating, but Wu Wang interrupted.

“You call him ‘Shizun,’ and he doesn’t renounce you. Is this not reason enough?”

That bald donkey! Shen Qingqiu twirled the fan in his hand, knocking away various swords and blades as they came at him from all kinds of bizarre angles, sending them flying. He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “What does this Shen’s renunciation or lack thereof have to do with you?”

The endless sounds of weapons clattering to the floor filled his ears. Shen Qingqiu turned and suddenly saw Yue Qingyuan coming at him straight on, imposing and formidable with a hand on Xuan Su’s hilt.

Shen Qingqiu’s arm immediately went weak, to the point that he almost sent his fan flying right from his hand.

Fight Yue Qingyuan? Like hell!

But unexpectedly, though Yue Qingyuan raised Xuan Su, he didn’t direct it at Shen Qingqiu, but rather glanced off course by a couple of inches. A resounding clang rang by Shen Qingqiu’s ear, and he quickly twisted his head around to look. Xuan Su’s hilt was in a deadlock with Wu Wang’s staff, having blocked it.

Unable to land a hit on Luo Binghe, Wu Wang had decided to hit Shen Qingqiu from behind!

Though Yue Qingyuan had joined the battle, he didn’t attack the two surrounded targets. Instead, he blocked the blades meant for Shen Qingqiu again and again. With Yue Qingyuan jumping in, Liu Qingge also entered the fray. The pair fought at random, their modus operandi about the same: they attacked anyone as long as it wasn’t Shen Qingqiu, causing nothing but trouble—the problem being that this “trouble” came in the form of two experts, and their attacks were both vicious and precise.

Finally, Wu Wang couldn’t take it anymore. “Peak Lord Liu!” he said, enraged.

A single slash of Liu Qingge’s blade shaved the whisks of the Tian Yi Temple Daoists into bald, featherless dusters. “My hand slipped,” he said, expressionless.

Wu Wang was so angry his whiskers stood straight up. “Sect Leader Yue!”

After deflecting Wu Wang’s staff from Shen Qingqiu for the third time, Yue Qingyuan spoke too. “My eyes were mistaken,” he said mildly.

Everyone at the scene thought in unison: *The saying that Cang Qiong Mountain sides with their own no matter the sin was indeed not baseless!*

One slip of the hand could be explained, but two? One mistake of the eyes was understandable, but they’ve been continuously mistaken ever since you stepped in! Can’t the two of you fight properly? Exactly whose side are you on?! (╯`□′)╯ ┻━┻

Yue Qingyuan and Liu Qingge sent a message with their actions: Go ahead and fight, but under no circumstances may you strike the Qing Jing Peak Lord!

Shen Qingqiu shoved Luo Binghe with the back of his hand. “You leave first!”

Not only did Luo Binghe fail to be shoved, he grabbed Shen Qingqiu’s wrist. “Shizun, let’s leave together. Come with me!”

Shen Qingqiu didn’t turn his head to look at Luo Binghe’s expression. First, there was no time, and second, he couldn’t bear it. He yanked his hand free and urged him on. “You’re still not going? When I tell you to leave, leave! Be good and listen to me!”

He didn’t know how long he could hold the others off, and he absolutely couldn’t abandon this mess of a situation and escape with Luo Binghe. Yue Qingyuan and Liu Qingge had been brazen with their show of bias, and Wu Wang was already furious. Either Shen Qingqiu or Luo Binghe had to stay behind, or open conflict would erupt between Zhao Hua Monastery and Cang Qiong Mountain.

After a short period of silence, Luo Binghe said quietly, “All right. Since Shizun said so.”

In the next moment, he’d landed on the field outside the main hall.

His speed was so fast, so terrifying, that for a moment everyone forgot to regroup with their weapons and chase him down.

“Set a barrier!” Wu Wang shouted.

Several monks rushed toward the field. Shen Qingqiu pulled out Xiu Ya with incredible speed and snapped his fingers. The sword careened forward right into their midst, disrupting their formation and sending them into disarray.

“This master will return to Cang Qiong Mountain first,” he called out to Luo Binghe. “I’ll come find you afterward.”

Luo Binghe had Meng Mo’s techniques; they’d be able to meet without a problem no matter the time, so long as Shen Qingqiu plopped his head down and slept. And when that time came, Shen Qingqiu would properly soothe Luo Binghe’s injured psyche and wounded heart. But at the thought of saying this out loud for everyone in the main hall to hear, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help but feel a little diffident. He sneaked a glance at the pair from Cang Qiong Mountain, unable to stop himself.

Luo Binghe saw this. The corner of his mouth twitched a little, and a strange smile spread over his face.

Quite a few people who saw that smile shivered, terror welling in their hearts for no discernible reason.

“I will come back for you, Shizun,” Luo Binghe said quietly.

Before those words had fully left his mouth, his silhouette had disappeared.

With him gone, Wu Wang let out a frustrated yell.

In contrast, Shen Qingqiu sighed in relief. He immediately recalled Xiu Ya to its sheath. Then he removed the sword from his waist and held it horizontally, offering it to Yue Qingyuan with both hands. “This situation was urgent. Having no alternative, Qingqiu committed a great many offenses, and he now asks Zhangmen-shixiong for his punishment.”

Yue Qingyuan made a sound in acknowledgment and pushed the sword back. “Since you’ve already come back, we can discuss the punishment after returning to Cang Qiong Mountain.”

Shen Qingqiu peeked at his face. Though Yue Qingyuan’s expression was incredibly stern, given his actions in the fray just now…that was probably only a show he was putting on for outsiders.

Based on prior experience, Yue Qingyuan’s “We can discuss this after returning to Cang Qiong Mountain” was basically equivalent to “Forget about it, let’s go home and have dinner”…

His sect leader was unquestionably incredibly lenient, but getting rid of Wu Wang wouldn’t be so simple. Luo Binghe had escaped in full view of everyone, and although most of the blame lay with the three peak lords stirring up chaos, Zhao Hua Monastery would lose face no matter how they tried to frame this.

So instead, Wu Wang pressed his palms together and said, “I’m afraid we can’t dismiss this incident so easily. At the very least, Peak Lord Shen must offer an explanation. Either that or Cang Qiong Mountain must offer an explanation in his stead!”

From a corner, someone said shrilly, “Just now, we called Su Xiyan confused for placing a man’s sweet and honeyed words above her master’s grace. But this Shen Qingqiu is even more confused. Even without Luo Binghe’s sweet words, he still fails to understand the full extent of the situation.”

Shen Qingqiu pretended he hadn’t heard this, while Yue Qingyuan remained courteous. “The discipline of Cang Qiong Mountain’s members naturally falls upon this Yue. I will of course offer everyone here a proper explanation.”

Master Wu Chen was pleased. “Amitabha, that is the best possible conclusion. I trust that Sect Leader Yue and Peak Lord Shen will most certainly settle this affair in a fair and proper manner.”

Everyone was speechless. They were all thinking that either Master Wu Chen’s monkhood had too far detached him from the dust-ups of mortal affairs, or that he was suppressing his conscience and lying through his teeth.

Wu Wang humphed, then continued his censure. “That might not be the case. Perhaps everyone here has forgotten the sower incident in Jin Lan City. Peak Lord Shen said then that he would explain himself, but the truth is that as of today, he has yet to give us anything. After a short incarceration in the Water Prison, he escaped, then faked his death in Hua Yue City and vanished for five years. Cang Qiong Mountain still has yet to release any sort of detailed statement on this matter. If this was the ‘explanation’ Peak Lord Shen and your honored sect meant, this one frankly cannot offer any compliments!”

He was dredging up old affairs, but Shen Qingqiu’s focus had wandered off and he wasn’t listening at all.

The System had already sent him a flashing red warning, like fuck he had the mind to listen to an old monk attempt to settle old scores!

The “Zhao Hua Monastery” scenario has ended. Final score: righteous image points -200. Quest completion status: 100 percent failed!

Shen Qingqiu had hit the two hundred-mark, but instead of plus two hundred, it was minus! In his long history of painful back-and-forths with the System, this was the first time he’d fallen below the danger line of zero!

Suddenly, a sharp pain pierced his head, along with an overwhelming sense of dizziness.

Quest failed! Honored customer, please be prepared: in sixty seconds, you will be sent back to your original world.

As long as any point values fell below zero, he’d be sent back to his original world!

“Don’t! Fuck!” Shen Qingqiu roared internally. “You’re sending me straight back just for this?! Don’t you know that my old account has already been canceled?! It was just one failure! I have so many satisfaction points—can’t they serve as compensation somehow? What about B-Points?! I have plenty of B-Points too! Surely having so many has some use?!”

Overwhelmed by panic, his mind churned and quaked while his face flashed through a myriad of colors: green then white then red, one after another.

Noticing that something was off, that Shen Qingqiu looked about to vomit or faint at any moment, Liu Qingge asked, “What’s wrong?”

Would you like to use all your current satisfaction points to purchase another method of punishment?

“Yes, yes, yes! Yes, no matter the cost!”

There came a ding.

Purchase successful. Satisfaction points reduced to 0. Please take note of your balance. Downloading the punishment.

The pink-hued satisfaction-points value really had become a zero. This was the second time he’d gone empty. Shen Qingqiu mentally waved goodbye.

His head was no longer in pain, but the dizziness remained.

Yue Qingyuan had also noticed something was wrong with him. “Were you hit?”

With a hand on Shen Qingqiu to keep him steady, Liu Qingge raised his head and asked, “Who hit him?”

The Bai Zhan Peak Lord was asking a question, and with such a terrifying look on top of that. Everyone fell over themselves to shake their heads.

This had to be an act! Who could have hit Shen Qingqiu?! In that situation, Shen Qingqiu was the last person who could have been hit, okay? Who was the one being protected by three masters, both covertly and in broad daylight? And now he wobbled? He had the audacity to wobble when he had only ever been hitting everyone else?!

The sounds of dispute around Shen Qingqiu became increasingly harsh and garbled. His head spun and spun, then his vision went dark. He went down with a thud, right between Yue Qingyuan and Liu Qingge.

He really collapsed.

***

When Shen Qingqiu opened his eyes again, he was no longer at Zhao Hua Monastery. He looked all around but saw absolutely no one.

From the look of things, he was in a dream realm. However, under normal circumstances, his current dreams always featured Qing Jing Peak. This was because he was connected to Luo Binghe’s dream realm, and Qing Jing Peak was the latter’s favorite dream realm location.

At a loss, Shen Qingqiu walked about for a while, carefully examining his surroundings. Suddenly, he realized that this was indeed Qing Jing Peak. However, it was Qing Jing Peak after it had been razed to the ground.

From the bamboo forests to the Bamboo House, all had been reduced to ashes. Only some crumbling debris and withered stalks remained, charred black and toppled over. Wisps of white and the scorched stench of smoke drifted above.

Faced with such utter desolation, the more Shen Qingqiu looked, the less he could remain calm. This was far too thorough a razing. What a massive grudge!

Shen Qingqiu pinged the System. “Can you explain the situation?”

Greetings. While the punishment is in progress, the System’s other functions will not be available as usual. We ask for your understanding and wish you good luck.

So the punishment had already begun. Shen Qingqiu punched an imaginary wall in his mind.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps on gravel reached his ears. The footsteps followed a pattern: each step was followed by a pause, slow but not hesitant. Instead, they gave off a sense of power, a feeling that the person in question was crouched in wait, ready to pounce.

In the midst of scorched earth and rubble, a silhouette slowly approached.

A cold wind blew, fluttering this person’s black robes and wide sleeves. His face was a flawless snow-white, matching the overlapping panels of his collar. Arms crossed, he slowly sauntered forward.

An expression of contemptuous disdain hung upon his face, and from time to time he kicked the charred pebbles by his feet with an air of utter disinterest.

Inadvertently, Shen Qingqiu called out, “Luo Binghe!”

Luo Binghe blinked, and his head turned just a little. A cold, indifferent gaze pierced the air toward Shen Qingqiu. It fell upon him like the stabs of two icy knives. His heart jerked, and suddenly the wind felt too fierce, his clothes a bit flimsy.

Or else why would there be a chill along his forehead and back?

Luo Binghe raised an eyebrow and flicked some nonexistent dream ash off his sleeves. He let out a closemouthed, questioning hum, a hint of confusion within it.

Shen Qingqiu immediately stopped right there. This feeling was wrong.

Luo Binghe tilted his head. “Shen Qingqiu?”

This was even more wrong. The tone, the expression, the disposition. None of it seemed like Luo Binghe—but at the same time, they all seemed like Luo Binghe.

If compelled to give a clearer explanation, Shen Qingqiu would have said that the person standing before him right now, felt like…the original “Luo Binghe.”

Shen Qingqiu froze on the spot.

With his lack of answer, “Luo Binghe” took a step toward him.

Shen Qingqiu automatically moved to grab his sword for self-defense, but the spot at his waist was completely empty.

He knocked on the door in his mind. “System, what exactly is up with this punishment scenario? Where did you get this scenario from? Are you telling me to fight the boss barehanded?!”

Greetings. While the punishment is in progress, the System’s other functions, including consultation, are not available. We ask for your understanding and wish you good luck.

Fuck me! Fuck, fuck, fuck, exactly what am I supposed to do in this situation?!

With his hands tucked into his sleeves, Luo Binghe smiled. “Shen Qingqiu, why are you here? From what I recall, I never let you in, no?”

Shen Qingqiu was now ten thousand percent certain that the person before him was absolutely not the Luo Binghe of the world he knew. When addressing him, Luo Binghe always said, “Shizun, Shizun,” his voice as sweet as honey. He never dared to call Shen Qingqiu by name, let alone speak to him like this, with a tone like he was goading a dog.

In any case, this was a punishment scenario, so Shen Qingqiu probably wouldn’t *die*. With this thought, Shen Qingqiu managed to relax a little. He said calmly, “This is Qing Jing Peak.”

Luo Binghe looked around. “If you hadn’t said so, I wouldn’t have remembered.”

How could he not remember? If this was truly the original Luo Binghe, wasn’t the culprit who’d so thoroughly razed Qing Jing Peak none other than himself?

“And why are you here?”

Luo Binghe shrugged. “Not sure.”

Then he leveled an unsettling smile on Shen Qingqiu.

It was a smile like Shen Qingqiu was a dog he was raising, and one day he’d suddenly discovered that this dog could say a couple of simple human words—how incredibly fun! His gaze made Shen Qingqiu’s hair stand on end from terror.

“You’re not afraid of me anymore?” Luo Binghe said.

I’m not afraid of the one out there. But I am afraid of the one in here!

Luo Binghe raised a hand and beckoned him. “Come here.”

If the original flavor Luo Binghe—and the post-darkening version at that—beckoned you in this way, you’d better obediently go even while shaking in terror. Yet Shen Qingqiu still had the courage to attempt a last-ditch struggle in the face of death. However, the moment he turned around, that black silhouette flashed in front of him, blocking his path. A couple more inches and Shen Qingqiu would slam into him.

Shen Qingqiu abruptly retreated several steps and narrowly missed falling backward. Luo Binghe grabbed his sleeve with two fingers and pulled him back. “Why did you run?” he asked gently.

With that face right in front of him, the current Shen Qingqiu could neither bring himself to hit nor genuinely fear its owner. Still unwilling to give up, he kept pinging the System.

“Is this really the original Luo Binghe? Not my world’s Luo Binghe? What should I do to clear the punishment? It can’t seriously be to fight him and win! What’s the difference between this and sending me back to my original world?!”

Greetings, while the punishment is in progress—

Shen Qingqiu X-ed out of the window.

Luo Binghe stared at his face for a while, then furrowed his brow. “Somehow I keep getting the feeling…that something about you is different. Are you really Shen Qingqiu?”

Shen Qingqiu blinked but remained cautious. Luo Binghe surveyed his face, a hint of bewilderment in his actions. Then he slowly took hold of Shen Qingqiu’s right hand.

His palm felt the same as always, both dry and cool. Shen Qingqiu’s heart stirred just a little, and he was about to say something when suddenly, his right shoulder went cold.

At that moment, Shen Qingqiu didn’t feel the sensation of his right arm leaving his shoulder. He only saw something being flung into the air, and half his body seemed lighter. Even then he didn’t fully understand—not until an earth-shattering pain lanced through his entire body and brain.

Luo Binghe had torn his right arm straight off!

Having suffered a traumatic injury, Shen Qingqiu’s body automatically retaliated with a burst of spiritual energy. But a single palm strike from Luo Binghe dispersed it into nothingness.

Crimson blood gushed out from his wound, impossible to stem. Shen Qingqiu’s head spun and vision swayed. He might have heard someone screaming, or he might not; his ears were ringing, so he couldn’t tell. His only thought was that he had to get away from the person before him *right now*.

He staggered backward, but after only a couple of steps, he tripped over a stray stalk of charred bamboo and fell straight onto his back.

The pain from the stump where his arm had been was too great. Even the sensation of his head smashing into the ground was lost on him. Luo Binghe leisurely came up to him again. This time, he stroked Shen Qingqiu’s calf in a gentle caress.

Human stick!

Luo Binghe was planning to turn him into a human stick!

Shen Qingqiu was in so much agony, he could barely breathe. He grabbed Luo Binghe with his remaining hand and shook his head, disoriented. Gasping and struggling for air, he said, “Don’t… Don’t…”

Don’t do this, not with that face.

Luo Binghe firmly pressed Shen Qingqiu to the ground with a single hand. His gaze could almost have been described as affectionate.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve done this, so why is Shizun still so unaccustomed?” he said softly. “Then how about we do it a couple more times and get you used to it slowly?”

In that instant, a horrific, gut-wrenching pain emanated from the root of Shen Qingqiu’s left thigh and rapidly tore through his entire body.

He couldn’t take it anymore. He began to scream.

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Chapter 19:
Shen Jiu

SUDDENLY, the System's monotone voice spoke a notification:

Punishment complete.

The pain abruptly vanished, and Shen Qingqiu violently sprang up before straightaway falling to his knees again. He wasn't even in the mood to roast anything or slap the System. Instead he remained half kneeling, watching his cold sweat splatter to the ground drop by drop, his vision still swimming with stars.

From beside him there suddenly came a voice. "What's wrong?"

Only then did Shen Qingqiu realize he wasn't alone.

It seemed that he hadn't returned to the real world. This was yet another dream realm.

Moreover, this cavern looked a little familiar. It was the cavern where Meng Mo had lurked as a black fog, back when Shen Qingqiu had his first experience entering dreams. The person next to him was indeed Meng Mo.

With difficulty, Shen Qingqiu managed to compose himself, then asked his own question. "How did I end up here with you?"

"You entered an incredibly powerful dream realm, and your spirit was at risk of being torn apart, so I'd been trying to interfere for a while. This elder tried many times but failed—I only succeeded just now, then incidentally brought you back to this barrier over here."

Based on Shen Qingqiu's past impressions, Meng Mo hadn't seemed particularly fond of him. That he'd go so far as to recognize a bad situation and even "incidentally" pull him out of it came as something of a surprise. "Many thanks to Senior," he said, heartfelt. "You truly helped me a great deal."

Meng Mo humphed. "No need to thank me. This elder was only surprised that last time in the Holy Mausoleum. You really did manage to persist until that brat woke up. So, you've helped him quite a bit too, and helping him also helps me."

The incredible agony of having his arm torn clean off was still branded in Shen Qingqiu's consciousness, and any moment that face surfaced within his mind, it triggered the memory. Shen Qingqiu couldn't help but hold his right shoulder with his left hand. Only after gulping down several breaths did he manage to say that name without his voice trembling. "How come I haven't seen Luo Binghe?"

Logically, the one who most loved pulling him into dreams, the one who was most enthusiastic about it, was Luo Binghe. Usually whenever Shen Qingqiu fell asleep, Luo Binghe came and harassed him. But this time, Meng Mo had actually gotten there first and pulled Shen Qingqiu into his barrier.

The mere thought of Luo Binghe depressed Meng Mo. "How should this elder know? From the moment that brat mastered my wondrous techniques, I was never able to enter his dream realm again. Of all those under heaven, his thoughts and dreams are the only ones this elder is utterly helpless against."

Shen Qingqiu needed to see that sweet and obedient Luo Binghe right away, or his limbs would keep aching every time that name came to mind. *Can that purehearted little white flower of a boy please show up right now and soothe me?!*

Meng Mo shot Shen Qingqiu a glance out of the corner of his eye. Seeing that his face was green and his lips were pale, he stiffly asked, "That brat will come and find you himself, so what's the rush? Didn't you avoid him like the plague before?"

Shen Qingqiu looked at Meng Mo pretending disdain and thought, *Does this count as an attempt to comfort me?*

Having relaxed a little while sitting on the ground, some time passed before Shen Qingqiu suddenly recalled something. "Senior Meng Mo, back at the Holy Mausoleum, I took Luo Binghe eastward with me. On the way, we encountered two people, and one of them was a woman. Did you…"

At that time, Qiu Haitang had fallen unconscious for a moment. Upon waking, she'd gone crazy for no reason, then fled in dismay. Shen Qingqiu strongly suspected that during the time she was out, she'd seen something in her dream realm. Since Luo Binghe had also been unconscious at that point, with his forehead burning like a red-hot coal, he couldn't have invaded Qiu Haitang's dreams. In that case, Meng Mo was the most likely meddler.

As expected, Meng Mo twirled his whiskers. “This elder indeed used a tiny trick.”

Though he acted indifferent, calling it a “tiny trick,” his voice held an unconcealable note of pride.

Shen Qingqiu couldn't help but ask, “What exactly did you show her?”

Normally, if Meng Mo wanted to psychologically crush a person, he showed them their darkest, most painful memories. Could he have dragged out her memories of the Qiu Massacre?

No, that couldn't be. If that had been the case, Qiu Haitang's reaction upon waking up and seeing Shen Qingqiu wouldn't have been what it was. She would have been overflowing with hatred and made to stab him, to pierce his body with a hundred holes. So why instead had she cried and screamed before turning around and fleeing?

“The memories I showed her,” Meng Mo said, “were not hers, but yours.”

Shen Qingqiu instantly understood. The memories of Shen Jiu, which still remained within his body!

They had been on his mind ever since Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky mentioned that Shen Qingqiu's original backstory was never transferred into the novel proper. He asked immediately, “May I request that Senior show them to me?”

Meng Mo sent him a glance, but he didn't ask why Shen Qingqiu needed someone else to show him his own memories. “You don't remember?”

Shen Qingqiu had been preparing to bullshit something evasive about how a qi deviation had damaged his memory, but now he nodded. “Correct.”

It had to be said, memory loss from qi deviation was fairly improbable.

Meng Mo surprisingly didn't interrogate him further. "Some things are better forgotten."

"I earnestly request Senior's assistance."

"You truly wish to see?"

Shen Qingqiu nodded several times.

Meng Mo reached out and pressed a finger to his forehead. "Close your eyes. Wait until I let go before opening them again."

Shen Qingqiu shut his eyes accordingly.

"Your memories are fragmented and incomplete, and you might see people whose features appear blurry or indistinct. Such issues arise from your own self."

Meng Mo meant that if there were bugs, the problem lay in Shen Qingqiu's personal data files and not his own technique.

Shen Qingqiu silently counted to ten and waited until the pressure on his forehead was gone. When he opened his eyes after, a frail-looking youth was kneeling before him on the ground, his hair loose and arms bound behind him with hemp rope.

The youth's face was fair with a pointed chin, his eyes and brows clear and delicate. Yet there was a persistent sullenness in his countenance, and two patches of bruising covered his forehead and a corner of his lips. This was the still-young Shen Jiu.

Back in Hua Yue City, while escaping Luo Binghe's dream realm barrier, Shen Qingqiu had accidentally fallen into one of Shen Jiu's fragmented memories, and this was the scene he'd witnessed. After a look around, he realized that his rushed glance back then hadn't seen wrong: this was a wide room in which a study and private quarters were connected. A sandalwood moon gate in the middle of the room separated the two areas, and the room itself was lavishly furnished, the four walls hung with beautifully framed art and calligraphy. Only a wealthy family could afford such things. It could not under any circumstances be the den of human traffickers.

Shen Qingqiu crossed his arms and leaned against a nearby display case, silently waiting.

The intricately carved wooden door before him opened without a whisper.

Shen Jiu was stiff and unmoving, though his eyes looked up. The approaching person crossed the threshold, their silhouette reflected in Shen Jiu's eyes.

It was a splendidly dressed youth. As his features were six-tenths identical to Qiu Haitang's, Shen Qingqiu knew that this must be the Qiu Massacre's most significant victim: Qiu Haitang's older brother.

His earlier suspicions had been correct. No matter how you looked at it, during Shen Jiu's days at the Qiu estate, he had not been doted upon, as Qiu Haitang had claimed.

The youth leisurely brushed past Shen Jiu, then paced a half-circle around him. Shen Jiu's face was tight, his lips pursed. Though his expression was sullen, his shoulders faintly trembled. It was obvious that he was terrified but forcing himself to appear calm.

Suddenly, Young Master Qiu kicked out, planting his foot right into Shen Jiu's back. Shen Jiu immediately slammed face-first into the floor.

Young Master Qiu sneered. "What, too afraid to hit back this time?"

"Have mercy, Young Master," Shen Jiu said in a low voice, his nose now bloody and smeared with ash. "I didn't know it was you."

"You didn't know? You didn't know and still had the gall to provoke me!"

Young Master Qiu knocked Shen Jiu to the ground with a single slap, and Shen Jiu's forehead met the ground in a muffled thud. Two streams of blood flowed from his nose down to his chin. Young Master Qiu seemed to derive great pleasure from the situation. He was clearly having incredible fun, like he was hitting a ball.

Shen Qingqiu observed from the side, speechless.

A few dozen rounds of this back-and-forth, and Shen Jiu finally couldn't take it anymore. "Exactly what do you want?!"

Young Master Qiu's smile was terribly malicious. "You're a member of my house now, so naturally I can do whatever I want."

Suddenly, a young girl's lovely voice came from outside the door. "Gege? Gege? Are you inside?"

Upon hearing his little sister's calls, Young Master Qiu's expression transformed, and he undid the ropes around Shen Jiu while quietly threatening him. "Wipe your face clean! Say one wrong word and you're dead!"

Both hateful and afraid, Shen Jiu's eyes flashed with a savage light. Though enraged, he didn't dare speak and viciously scrubbed at his face twice, wiping at the blood and dust. But who could have known that the more he wiped, the dirtier it would become? When Young Master Qiu saw this, he grabbed a vase from the windowsill and splashed the water within onto Shen Jiu's face. Then he switched expressions entirely and opened the door, his smile beaming with joy. "What has Tang-er come here for?"

Shen Qingqiu finally understood how the original flavor's personality, where he flattered you to your face then stabbed you in the back, had developed. Most probably he'd picked it up from Young Master Qiu through osmosis…

Qiu Haitang was dressed in a light-purple brocade, and on her feet were little white satin boots with pearls stitched to the toes. She was truly like unto a tender young lady who'd been nurtured inside a flower bud, and she possessed a completely different type of loveliness from her future, weather-beaten beauty. She walked through the door, giggling. "I heard that gege purchased someone, so I came to see what they were like."

When she saw the youth standing in the corner, she noticed that, despite his listlessly lowered head and how he shrank into himself, his face was very pretty. Her eyes brightened and she walked over to him, all full of smiles. "So you're Xiao-Jiu?"

Shen Jiu's face had already been wiped clean, but he remained surly and dour, refusing to answer.

Standing behind his sister, Young Master Qiu's eyes flashed with a threatening light. He smiled. "He's rather temperamental, and he doesn't really like to speak."

Qiu Haitang moved to hold Shen Jiu's hand. "Why don't you like to speak? Say something to me, please?"

Her voice was soft and sweet, her tone affectionate, and on top of that, she painted the perfect picture of innocence. Lashing out at her would have been unbearable to anyone.

Ning Yingying was really quite similar to Qiu Haitang in her youth, thought Shen Qingqiu. So the original flavor had always been partial to this type.

Initially, Shen Jiu kept his face stiff, but he couldn't resist this sort of young girl's gentle wheedling. With his expression shuttered, he turned his head away, his ears blushing a slight red.

At the sight of this, Qiu Haitang clapped her hands. "Gege, he's so much fun! No wonder you purchased him even though you've always hated bringing in outsiders. I rather like him."

Young Master Qiu smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. "I too like him very much."

Upon hearing the word "like," Shen Jiu couldn't help but shiver.

At this point in the memory, the scene suddenly darkened. Everyone present likewise swiftly vanished without a trace. Shen Qingqiu startled, then realized that this was what Meng Mo had talked about: the memories were cutting off. Since the original flavor's memories within his body were fragmented and incomplete, breaks like this would be common. The previous memory segment had already finished, and now another one would begin.

The setting was the same room. This time, Shen Jiu wasn't tied up. He lay prostrate on the floor, his nose bruised and face swollen, his fingers viciously clawing at the rug, to the point that his fingertips were stained with blood.

Suddenly, two light knocks sounded on the door. A youth's hushed voice called from outside, "Xiao-Jiu, Xiao-Jiu?"

When Shen Jiu heard this voice, he abruptly moved and threw himself at the door, his face pressed up to the locks. "Qi-ge!"[9]

"Be a little quieter; I snuck inside."

Initially, Shen Qingqiu had no idea who the person outside was, but then his thinking switched tracks: Shen Jiu's name was "nine" because he was the ninth child taken by the human traffickers. It naturally followed that there must also have been a "one" through "eight."

However, to think that Shen Jiu, with his personality, had actually managed to make a good friend. That came as a true surprise to Shen Qingqiu.

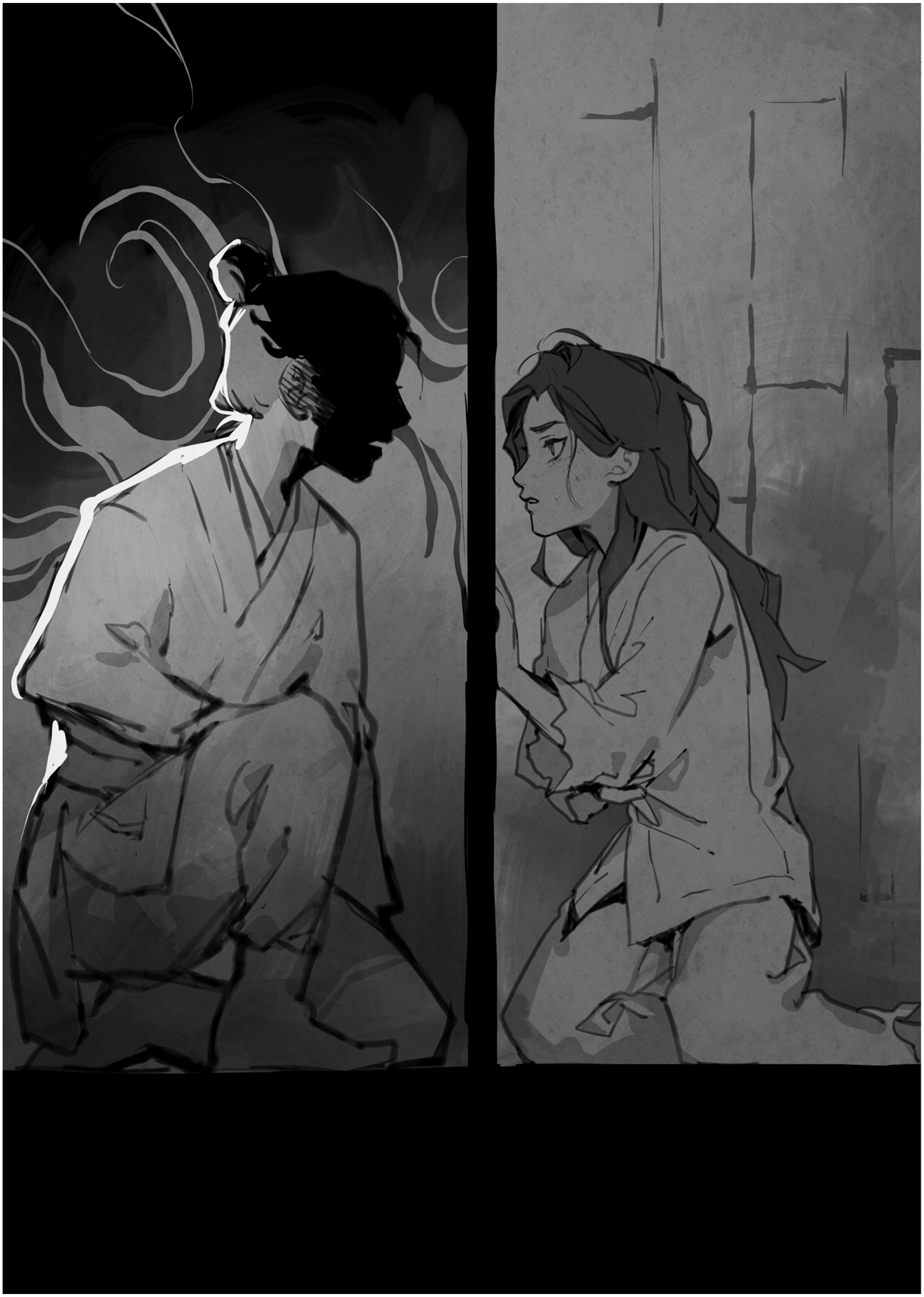
From the door came the sound of rattling, like the person outside was shaking it.

"It's no use," Shen Jiu said. "There are five to six sets of locks both inside and out. The windows are also locked."

"The escape failed this time," the youth said worriedly. "They didn't do anything to you, did they?"

Shen Jiu's anger suddenly surged. "Didn't do anything to me?" he snapped. "Are you stupid? They shut me in here for two days and broke both my legs. What do you think?!"

Shen Qingqiu could clearly see that although Shen Jiu had taken quite a beating and was unable to walk, his legs were perfectly fine and weren't broken at all.



But that youth couldn’t see through the door and seemed to take the claim as accurate. “It’s all my fault,” he said guiltily.

“Of course it was your fault!” Shen Jiu said angrily. “It’s all because of you. We weren’t close to those newcomers anyway, so what if he trampled them? Why did you step in?! Were you afraid our lives weren’t unfortunate enough?! If you hadn’t stepped in, I wouldn’t have helped you! If I hadn’t helped you, I wouldn’t have provoked him, and the Qius wouldn’t have asked to purchase me! And if he hadn’t purchased me, I wouldn’t have ended up like this! A light beating the second day and a heavy beating the third, smacking me around like a dog!”

That youth kept saying over and over, “I’m sorry, it’s all my fault.”

As expected, with Shen Jiu’s personality, any friend he made had to be so good-natured that they were painful to watch. After Qi-ge’s continuous chain of apologies, Shen Jiu’s temper finally managed to cool. “Whatever! I don’t give a damn about that loyalty crap. Never have and never will. So that single moment was all I’ve got in me for the rest of my life. You can take it.”

“I understand,” the youth said gratefully.

“Like hell you do!” Shen Jiu said viciously.

“I really do understand. Qi-ge will remember this loyalty; in the future he’ll definitely repay you.”

“What future?!” Shen Jiu spat. “Someone like you, who’ll spend his entire life in the hands of human traffickers? You’ll just end up a trafficker yourself—that’s your future. No wait, you’re too good of a person; you won’t make it. At most you’ll continue with the panhandling.”

“Xiao-Jiu, I came to tell you this: I’m leaving, so I’m here today to say goodbye.”

Shocked, Shen Jiu immediately sat up. “Leaving? Leaving where?”

The youth called Qi-ge said, “I can’t stay here. The Qiu family has too much wealth and power in this city. We can’t beat them, and we can’t escape them. There are many cultivation sects in the world—I’ll go apply to one. Once I’ve learned immortal techniques, I’ll come back to save you.”

Shen Jiu’s eyes suddenly shone with a dazzling brightness. “Qi-ge, they say that there’s an immortal mountain to the east where they recruit highly qualified disciples every year. Is that where you’re going?”

“I don’t know… But I’ll try them all. Surely at least one will accept me?”

“If only I wasn’t locked up here, I could go with you too…” Shen Jiu muttered. Unbidden, an expression of envy appeared on his face as he stared at the crack in the door. It looked like he was thinking something malicious. Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help but sweat with worry for the person outside.

Some time passed, then Shen Jiu sighed. “Qi-ge, you really gotta be less impulsive in the future. You mess up every single time. This time I was the unlucky one, but if you’re still like this in the future after joining those immortal sects, what are you gonna do? You gotta keep calm!”

He was lecturing someone older than him, and at such a tender age too. It was somehow comical. Yet the other youth didn’t seem the slightest bit unhappy. Instead he said earnestly, “I’ll remember.”

Now that he had hope, Shen Jiu’s voice became fervent. “You absolutely have to remember the things you said! You must come back to save me!”

Qi-ge seemed to be nodding his head hard. “All right,” he said emphatically. “Wait for me. Once I finish my training, I’ll definitely come back—then we’ll leave together!”

Separated by the door, the two youths fell into a silence.

“Did you leave?” asked Shen Jiu.

“Not yet,” the youth said hastily. “I was waiting for you to speak.”

“Qi-ge, come closer and let me see you through the crack,” said Shen Jiu. “Since we don’t know if you’ll…how many years it’ll be before we meet again.”

The youth laughed. “You wanted to say that you don’t know if I’ll die out there, yes? All right.”

Shen Jiu made a dismissive noise. “You said it yourself! You can’t blame me for harsh words this time.” He struggled to move closer to the door and pressed his face up to the crack.

Intensely curious, Shen Qingqiu pressed himself up to it as well. Through that tiny sliver of a crack, he looked outside.

WTF!

Shen Qingqiu wasn't freaking out over the other person's face. That would have been better, because the problem was the youth outside the door—his face was a fucking blur, like it'd been censored with a mosaic!

Meng Mo had told him from the start that there would be a chance of blurred faces and fragmented memories, but now that it had really happened, Shen Qingqiu felt the burning urge to cough up blood anyway.

Great Master Meng Mo, can't you take just a little time to fix this bug?! I really want to know what his face looks like, ahhhhhh!

Right as Shen Qingqiu was preparing to charge out the door to see if closing the distance could get rid of the mosaic, the memory cut off again.

This time, the setting was the study.

Young Master Qiu was writing at his desk while Shen Jiu stood at his side, grinding ink for him.

Shen Jiu at this time was still a frail-looking youth, though he'd grown in height and could be considered tall and slender compared to others his age. As he stood there serving Young Master Qiu, the air of an aloof scholar drifted about him.

As the paper neared completion, Shen Jiu said submissively, "Young Master, there's something…"

Young Master Qiu didn't lift his eyes. "Is this about that jianghu scam artist?"

"Senior Wu Yanzi isn't a jianghu scam artist."

Young Master Qiu put away his pen and frowned. "All you need to do is stay here and behave yourself. Do your part as brother-in-law and live your peaceful life with my sister. What's the point of all those wild fantasies?"

After a stretch of silence, Shen Jiu suddenly gritted his teeth. "Live my life, live my life… I don't want to live that kind of life!"

Young Master Qiu finally raised his eyes and sent Shen Jiu a glance, then suddenly kicked the back of his knee.

Shen Jiu fell face-first onto the floor with a thud. Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help but rub at his own perfectly uninjured leg. Had the two of them followed this pattern all through these years…?

Young Master Qiu rose from his seat with a mocking smile. “To think that the time I spent teaching you over the years, everything you’ve learned, couldn’t compare to a jianghu scam artist’s crooked little tricks.”

Shen Jiu’s nose was bloody, but he raised his head and sneered back with an air of arrogance. “They’re not ‘crooked little tricks,’ they’re immortal techniques. An ordinary, talentless person like you can only comfort yourself by calling him a ‘jianghu scam artist.’”

Young Master Qiu crouched down and grabbed a handful of Shen Jiu’s hair. “Immortal techniques?” he asked, tone affectionate. “A piece of trash like you actually wants to cultivate to immortality?”

Shen Jiu averted his gaze, wanting to avoid Young Master Qiu’s hand, but the latter only patted his forehead slowly, the action full of ridicule. Smiling, he said, “You don’t even count as human, and you want to be an immortal?”

Shen Jiu held his head and remained silent.

Seeing that Shen Jiu had wilted, Young Master Qiu gentled his actions some, his tone heartfelt. “What’s wrong with staying here and behaving yourself? Just earnestly doing your duties? You’re already fifteen, no longer young, and even about to be married. The best time for cultivating has long since passed you by. What’s there to cultivate? If you stupidly leave with him, he might not even want you.”

Digging his grave! Young Master Qiu was really digging his grave!

What the original flavor cared about more than anything else in his life was his cultivation. He couldn’t stand anyone’s being better than his and could tolerate others speaking ill of it even less. Otherwise he wouldn’t have hated and envied Luo Binghe to the point of insanity. And this dumbass had actually dared to say that he was without prospects!

Shen Jiu violently flung out his arm, grabbed the inkstone on the desk, and hurled it at Young Master Qiu. From this angle, it also looked like he'd launched it at Shen Qingqiu, who unconsciously ducked to the side.

The inkstone failed to hit him, of course, and it didn't strike Young Master Qiu either. But it did splatter the young master's bottom half with a good amount of black ink, completely ruining his beautifully embroidered robe. Young Master Qiu's face immediately fell. "Tang-er's fondness for you is several lives' worth of fortune for you!" he shouted. "If it weren't for our family, you'd still be on the streets even now, playing a beggar and swindling for a living. That you don't lack for clothes, that you can even read and write when you're only pretender trash—who gave all that to you?" He slapped Shen Jiu's head into the floor. "Utter ingrate!"

Shen Jiu seemed ready to burn all his bridges. "I'm a human," he said viciously. "Why should I be grateful toward a beast?!"

What admirable courage.

With a single strike, Young Master Qiu flung Shen Jiu into the wall. "And I thought you'd made some progress these past few years! But of course a piece of shit can't be polished!"

Upon the white wall hung a sword. When Shen Jiu slammed into the wall, the blade fell to the ground. As he sat splayed against the wall, his hand touched the sword. He drew it in his panic and held it in trembling hands, pointing it at Young Master Qiu and his bloodshot eyes.

The young master didn't for an instant believe that Shen Jiu would actually use the weapon. "Still quite a temper you have," he said, pointing back at him. "Your bones itching for another beating?"

As he came several steps closer, Shen Jiu's soul almost fled his body in terror. "Stay away!"

"You good-for-nothing! You—"

After that "you," Young Master Qiu was no longer able to speak. He slowly lowered his head: the sword had been thrust straight into his stomach.

Young Master Qiu's face was full of disbelief as Shen Jiu wrenched the sword out.

Meanwhile, on the side, Shen Qingqiu felt a conflicted kind of thrill… Fuck, fuck, fuck, this was streaming live from the scene of the murder!

The situation had changed in the blink of an eye. A couple short words and the incident unfolded!

Shen Jiu was frozen. Young Master Qiu covered his stomach with one hand, then forcefully snatched the sword away with the other. He kicked Shen Jiu to the floor and screamed, “Guards!”

Shen Jiu quickly threw himself forward and throttled Young Master Qiu by the neck. While they struggled and fought, several guards rushed in. The moment they laid eyes upon the scene in the study, they began to yell. Both panicked and terrified, Shen Jiu formed some kind of seal, and the sword in Young Master Qiu’s hand shot forward, goring straight through the chests of several guards.

He turned his head again to see Young Master Qiu staggering toward him, crimson-stained hand moving to grab his hair. Shen Jiu sent the sword at him once more, this time piercing his lung.

He followed up with stab after stab. Using all his strength, Shen Jiu’s thrusts became increasingly vicious, and his expression increasingly savage. Only after more than fifty stabs, by which point the corpse’s face and vital organs had been reduced to a mess of blood and gore, did Shen Jiu finally stop, panting.

This was probably Shen Jiu’s first time killing a person, and on top of that, the first time he’d use his own spiritual energy to do so.

Having witnessed the incident in its entirety, Shen Qingqiu was stunned. Such a brutal first time!

For a while, Shen Jiu stood dumbfounded at the room full of corpses. Then he suddenly came back to himself, the sword falling from his hands with a clatter. As if his senses had left him entirely, he paced back and forth within the study, subconsciously wiping his hands on his clothes over and over. However, his mind was only gone for a moment before he managed to compose himself at a shockingly swift speed.

The entire shift in emotional state had taken less than a minute. Such mental fortitude!

Shen Jiu steadied himself, then curled one of his fingers, testing. The sword on the ground, still soaked in a horrifying amount of blood, slowly rose into the air.

It flew toward Shen Jiu. As he stared at the blade, a peculiar expression of excitement bloomed on his face before he reached out and grabbed it firmly. He gave the sword a brandish, then left the study with the weapon.

Shen Qingqiu stood in place for a while until the System sent him a notification:

Gentle warning: Please stay locked on the plot hole-filling target. We recommend staying within ten meters of the target to guarantee full retrieval of the plotline!

So not following the plot hole-filling target meant potentially losing bits of story? Shen Qingqiu quickly followed after Shen Jiu, not daring to fall a single step behind. Shen Jiu had just turned a corner to meet two rotund, heavyset guards. With a swing of his arm, a cold light flashed horizontally, slicing the two bloated, fleshy necks together. Blood sprayed as if from a fountain.

Shen Jiu killed nearly every person he saw, and the more he killed, the higher his spirits climbed, the sinister smile on his lips stretching wider and wider. Unceasing screams followed him everywhere as he cleanly and decisively cut down some ten people. Shen Qingqiu noticed that he only killed men: not a single woman fell under his blade. The female servants and maids were all huddled in a corner in the kitchen, but Shen Jiu didn’t go out of his way to execute them. With such clear discrimination between the sexes, he’d made the targets of his hatred extremely obvious.

Shen Qingqiu was still watching, gripped with alarm and terror, when a sudden scream came from behind him.

Qiu Haitang stood at the end of the hall, blankly staring in their direction. Blood splattered Shen Jiu’s body. He looked like a living ghost, one who was currently yanking his sword out of a guard’s neck.

Qiu Haitang’s lovely face twitched several times, then her eyes rolled back into her skull and she collapsed, falling back into a pool of blood. It seemed like this maiden had always been the type to faint in critical situations.

Upon seeing Qiu Haitang, Shen Jiu calmed down a little, and the arm holding his sword dropped to his side. After pondering for a moment, he headed toward the kitchen.

Not long after that, a fire began to blaze. The dark clouds in the night sky above the Qiu Manor were suffused with a searing red, like the magma from purgatory.

As Shen Jiu dragged Qiu Haitang's body into the bushes outside, a person silently appeared behind him. Shen Jiu grabbed his sword and quickly turned around, his eyes ferocious. But when he saw who it was, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Senior."

This "Senior" must have been the one who'd set up the altar trial within the city, the one who'd kindled and fanned Shen Jiu's treachery. Wu Yanzi.

Wu Yanzi gave a soft chortle. "Not killing everyone?"

Shen Jiu was silent for a moment. "Everyone who I wanted to kill is already dead."

"Actually, one of the points your brother made was correct. It's true you were born with talent, but the best age for cultivating is already behind you. Furthermore, due to the abuse you suffered under him, there's been some damage to your natural bases. A number of achievements should still be within your reach, but if you wish to become one of the best…that is no longer possible. A few years earlier and things would have been different."

If this man had heard Young Master Qiu's words, he must have watched the disastrous incident from beginning to end. Yet he'd had no intention of interfering and instead only watched on from the sidelines. It looked like this "Senior" wasn't an especially gentle sort. If Shen Jiu really did leave with him, he likely wouldn't walk a bright and just path either.

Before, Shen Qingqiu had thought that this body's qualifications were already incredible, to have formed a core in only ten or so years when he'd begun cultivation so late. He never would have predicted that Shen Qingqiu originally could have gone even further. Faced with this truth, even a person devoid of ambition like himself couldn't help but sigh and lament. So, it wasn’t hard to understand why the highly competitive original flavor had always brimmed with vindictive bitterness. After all, having something and losing it, as opposed to never having it at all, would leave a person even more resentful.

Veins bulged on the back of Shen Jiu’s sword hand. “That beast wasn’t my brother,” he said coldly. “Besides, did you offer me any other option?”

That person had already turned around, but when he saw that Shen Jiu still standing before the Qiu Manor gates, he asked, “Not leaving even now? Who are you waiting for?”

That “who are you waiting for” was a rhetorical question asked without meaning, intended only to urge him on. Shen Jiu turned his head to gaze at the towering inferno consuming the Qiu estate, and his eyes seemed to blaze along with it.

The Qiu servants who’d been lucky enough to escape death scrambled and fell over one another as they fled. Amidst the wails and screams, only Shen Jiu’s ash-white figure stood firmly before the gates, the red-gold flames behind him flickering and weaving in their wild dance.

The fires of Qiu estate burned hotter and brighter, and the rafters lurched and collapsed. Faintly carved upon Shen Jiu’s blackened, soot-covered cheek was a thin, pale track.

He forcefully flung his sword forth, hurling it into the sea of flames, then turned around as well.

“No more waiting.”

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Shen Qingqiu had always known that the youth who promised to return to save him would never come back.

It was only logical, wasn’t it? This was a well-known flag, and together with the line “Let’s get married in our hometown” was known as half of the “Flag Duo.” If anyone vowed that they would “definitely come back" or "be back right away," it was guaranteed that you would never see so much as a shadow of them again.

These two children really had been too naive, too optimistic.

As long as Qi-ge visited each sect one by one, he'd definitely find one willing to accept him? Completely wrong.

Even if he did happen to get accepted and managed to succeed in his studies after several years, he would have seen more of the world and gained many more things to worry about, so there was no guarantee that he'd return to look for his childhood companion. Furthermore, the jianghu was unpredictable, and all kinds of disasters could unfold. Therefore the chance of that youth actually returning to rescue Shen Jiu had been less than five percent.

However, now that the plot hole had been filled to this extent, Shen Qingqiu understood a little of why Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky had taken an axe to the outline.

When written within the bounds of the original genre, this kind of character was extremely difficult to handle. You could say he was scum, but he was also pitiful. But if you tried to acknowledge his pathos, his ruthlessness was real too. Characters that were both scummy and tragic always drew aggro, and they were a hotbed for wank, leading comments sections to devolve into massive flame wars. Better to hack him down into a formulaic asshole and let the protagonist step on him. Easier to write, and the readers would find it satisfying as well.

Meanwhile, Qiu Haitang was completely innocent. All through that incident, she hadn't done anything wrong. But with a deep love came an equally deep hatred. It had ground a naive, purehearted girl down into a calculating, bitter, and vengeful woman. Her death in the Holy Mausoleum was even less deserved. If anything, her ending in the original stallion novel had been happier.

If only he could have given her a hand, back in the beginning.

Shen Qingqiu was still sighing when the scene suddenly began to flash with black-and-white static like an old television. The setting and faces distorted into something unwatchable, while the sounds became crackling noise and gibberish.

The System sent a notification:

Incomplete memory warning, 5 percent of full dataset lost; 7 percent of full dataset lost; 9 percent of full dataset lost…

The memory fragmentation was spreading further and further!

As the percentage of data lost grew increasingly large, Shen Qingqiu violently smacked the notification window, just like how he'd helped "fix" the TV's poor connection when he was little. After a couple dozen smacks, it actually worked: when the percentage loss hit ten, the notification alarm abruptly ceased. The scene's static vanished as well, becoming clear.

Only then did Shen Qingqiu breathe a sigh of relief. He let go and backed up. He'd yet to stand properly when his eyes widened.

Crouching only a couple of steps in front of him was a young boy.

That fair and tender face was smeared with several streaks of dust, probably accidentally left there when wiping away his sweat. A red string was looped around his neck, a jade Guanyin dangling from it, and tied to his back was a ragged cloth bundle patterned with tiny flowers. Currently he was diligently scratching at the ground in an attempt to…dig a hole.

"Luo Binghe?" Shen Qingqiu blurted out.

Little Luo Binghe didn't hear him and kept zealously digging his hole.

When Shen Qingqiu looked around, he found they were in a vast canyon with hundreds of boys and girls of varying ages, dressed in all sorts of clothing. Each and every one was pouring all their effort into…digging holes.

Understanding dawned on Shen Qingqiu. He raised his head and looked up. Sure enough, above the canyon loomed a steeply projected rock face. Upon it stood two people.

One person was dressed in a dark-hued xuanduan robes, his bearing calm and composed. His focus was on the hundreds of people in the canyon below him. The other person wore a sword at his waist, and he twirled a folding fan between his fingers. Teal robes the color of emerald seas fluttered slightly in the wind. His face was subtly raised as he squinted downward, his attitude like that of one who couldn't be bothered with the ants beneath him.

This was Yue Qingyuan and "Shen Qingqiu."

And this was the scene of Cang Qiong Mountain's recruitment trial the year when Luo Binghe entered.

Yes, you really didn't see wrong, the trial's objective was digging holes!

Though Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky had used many paragraphs and author notes to explain that "digging holes wasn't just about digging holes; using this simple exercise, they could assess the diggers' stamina, speed, perseverance, spiritual energy circulation, and even moral character, etc.," but Shen Qingqiu couldn't remember a single justification. In his heart, no matter how many explanations Airplane bullshitted, it didn't change that the whole thing was just digging holes!

The Shen Jiu of this time had already ascended to the position of Qing Jing Peak Lord.

A rule of Cang Qiong Mountain was thus: the twelve peak lords moved as one, meaning that all their successions and departures were conducted in unison. The inauguration ceremonies were likewise always performed for a group, and the decision to retire was even more so united. Even if a peak lord met an unfortunate death during their tenure, their position remained empty. Back when Shen Qingqiu had faked his death and vanished for five years, Qing Jing Peak's seat had remained vacant as well. So, peak lords of different generations never led together.

This made certain extraordinary situations more troublesome, but without a generation gap, the emotional bonds and sense of camaraderie between the peak lords were much stronger.

With this thought, Shen Qingqiu couldn't help but mentally jump to another rule.

After confirming their succeeding disciples, the senior generation of peak lords always gave their heirs new names based on their generational character—to highlight their special status. There were so many possible names that began with this generation's character, "Qing," but Shen Jiu just had to end up with "Qing*qiu*," like the world was truly out to get him.

Shen Jiu hated the character “Qiu” to the bone, yet the name was bestowed upon him anyway. How couldn’t he choke on the bitterness? Even Shen Qingqiu couldn’t stop himself from wanting to coddle the man for thirty seconds. No wonder the original flavor felt little gratitude or respect toward the previous Qing Jing Peak Lord.

Shen Jiu and Yue Qingyuan appeared to be engaged in discussion upon the rock. Shen Qingqiu glanced at little Luo Binghe, who was engrossed in his task. He gave his head a couple of phantom pats, then leapt onto the rock face to stand next to the duo, listening in.

“There’s even more people here this year, compared to past trials,” said Yue Qingyuan.

Shen Jiu squinted, his expression devoid of joy or anger. With a subtle shift of his two fingers, the fan in his hand slightly opened.

From the side, another person approached and bowed to Yue Qingyuan. “Zhangmen-shixiong.”

This person completely ignored Shen Jiu, who stood next to them, his eyes about to overflow with resentment.

Besides Great Master Liu, who else would have that much arrogance?!

At this point, Liu Qingge’s formal ascension to Bai Zhan Peak Lord, too, had likely only happened a couple years ago. There was a visible air of immaturity about his features, his gaze fierce and sharp, and within his every action was a young man’s spirited vigor.

“Excellent timing, Liu-shidi,” said Yue Qingyuan. “Why not take a look and see who’s best?”

Liu Qingge only needed a glance to say, “Talent-wise, him.”

Shen Qingqiu gave a satisfied nod. Great Master Liu had a good eye indeed. The one he pointed to had his back to them, and it was the diligently digging Luo Binghe.

“Does Liu-shidi want him?” asked Yue Qingyuan.

“Those who wish to come to me will come themselves.”

Bai Zhan Peak had always been the same: Come or don’t come; do as you please. But if you come, prepare yourself for a beating. Anyone who waited around for others to take them as their disciple had no future and no place on Bai Zhan Peak. The ones who did were those who took the initiative to come to Bai Zhan Peak themselves, screaming and crying and begging to be beat up.

Shen Jiu said mildly, “Good talent doesn’t guarantee success.”

Liu Qingge didn’t even grace him with a sideways glance. “But certainly more success than a nobody who only began proper cultivation at age sixteen.”

Sure enough, these two had never been able to see eye to eye. At all. Liu Qingge disliked speaking, and he disliked speaking to people with whom he didn’t see eye to eye even more. Yet for the purpose of taunting Shen Jiu, he’d actually managed fifteen words!

That his own current relationship with Liu Qingge wasn’t too terrible was practically a miracle.

“Liu-shidi.” Yue Qingyuan’s tone was full of reproach.

Liu Qingge had no interest in being lectured and turned to leave right away. “I’m going to practice.”

He departed without a second word, coming and going like the wind. Shen Jiu stood stiffly in place, shaking in rage at Liu Qingge’s insult. Two sharp cracks sounded from the fan as he squeezed it, his grip overly forceful.

“Liu-shidi isn’t good with words.” Yue Qingyuan’s tone was resigned. “You’ve always known this, so you must not mind him.”

Shen Jiu humphed, his air sullen and spiteful. He seemed about to say something when Ning Yingying clambered up.

“Shizun, Shizun,” she called, flinging her arms around Shen Jiu’s waist. “Will Yingying get a shimei or a shidi?”

When Shen Jiu looked at her, his face relaxed somewhat. “Would you like a shidi or shimei?”

Ning Yingying nodded several times. Shen Jiu raised his head and opened his fan, giving it a couple of waves. He squinted to himself, starting to plot something or other. Suddenly, he spoke. “I want that child.”

He was staring at Luo Binghe. Yue Qingyuan startled.

The original flavor’s unsavory track record in terms of his treatment of highly talented disciples had probably long since spread throughout the entire sect. Now he’d again asked his sect leader for a promising young sprout. So, Shen Qingqiu could understand Yue Qingyuan’s hesitation. It really…required some careful deliberation.

Upon seeing Yue Qingyuan’s reluctance and lack of answer, Shen Jiu coldly repeated himself. “I want him.”

Speaking to even your sect leader that way? That’s asking to be hit! Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help but break out in a cold sweat.

Unexpectedly, Yue Qingyuan slowly nodded, giving his consent. “All right.”

Shen Qingqiu was utterly speechless.

To think Yue Qingyuan could tolerate even that… Exactly how had this body of his safely survived to this day?!

And then there was Great Master Liu. *So the reason behind the original flavor wanting to snatch up Luo Binghe for himself at all costs was the seed of disaster* you *planted!*

Ning Yingying cheered and ran down the rock, heading into the crowd in the canyon to grab Luo Binghe. In the original text, this was the opening scene of where Luo Binghe entered the sect under Shen Qingqiu!

However, because it had been from the male lead’s point of view, “Great Master” Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky hadn’t written the interactions between the three peak lords in detail, with all their subtle undercurrents. Instead, the passage had started right from a sweet-smelling young girl descending from the sky, suddenly coming to take Luo Binghe with her. Surely upon reading that opening, every single reader had the same thought as Shen Yuan back then: that this would be the start of the male lead’s godly and unstoppable good fortune, both in love and in general. They hardly imagined that it was actually a crumb of sugar before a grand parade of three hundred stabs.

Shen Qingqiu knew what awaited Luo Binghe next, but he could only continue watching helplessly. Watch as Luo Binghe followed Ning Yingying until they arrived at Qing Jing Peak's Bamboo House. Watch as Shen Jiu sat in the seat where Shen Qingqiu always had, a teacup in hand, scraping at the tea leaves.

Shen Jiu quickly sent the chittering Ning Yingying away with an excuse. Ming Fan stood beside him and spoke in his place. "Starting from today, you will stay on Qing Jing Peak."

Little Luo Binghe's face was flushed red with surprised joy. He knelt to bow, form prim and proper, then said in a crisp, bright voice, "Disciple Luo Binghe greets Shizun!"

The corner of Shen Jiu's mouth twitched, and he finally lowered the teacup from his chin. His words slow and measured, he said, "Tell me, why did you come to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect?"

Luo Binghe nervously yet earnestly replied like he was reciting from a book. "This disciple has always admired the many immortal masters on the mountain, their persons and demeanors both. If he can enter the sect and find success in his learning, this disciple's mother in heaven will be able to find peace."

Shen Qingqiu knew this was an answer that Luo Binghe had devised on the road, one that he'd tossed and turned and polished unceasingly.

Shen Jiu made a noncommittal noise. "You had a mother?" Demeanor cavalier, he asked, "What was your mother like?"

Luo Binghe raised his smiling face, his eyes shining brightly. "Mother was the kindest person in all the world to me."

Shen Jiu's face twitched, and he raised a hand to stop him. He looked Luo Binghe up and down once. "Indeed, you're at the best age for cultivating."

Shen Qingqiu saw three things on the original flavor's face: envy, envy, and more envy.

Envy that Luo Binghe had a mother who was "the kindest in all the world to him," envy of Luo Binghe's talent, envy that Luo Binghe would enter Cang Qiong Mountain Sect at the best age for cultivating. He was indeed the kind of person to brim with envy and resentment toward a young child.

Shen Jiu stood and walked over to Luo Binghe, his steps measured. Shen Qingqiu inadvertently moved to shield him, but how could he stop anything?

Luo Binghe raised his face and watched the Qing Jing Peak Lord approach, his expression like that of a boy gazing at a celestial god.

But who knew that the celestial god would walk right by him without a glance? At the same time, Shen Jiu casually tossed the tea in his hand, cup and lid and all, onto Luo Binghe.

The tea wasn’t freshly boiled, the temperature only hot instead of scalding, but Luo Binghe’s entire person still froze, stunned.

Ming Fan’s footsteps padded after Shen Jiu, who’d walked out of the Bamboo House without a second word, hands behind his back. But before the former stepped out the door, he yelled behind him, “Kneel! Shizun hasn’t allowed you to get up. If you dare get up, be warned that you’ll be strung up and beaten, and after the beating, you’ll be shut in the woodshed for three days!”

For the first time, Shen Qingqiu realized that, in terms of talent in digging his own cannon-fodder grave, that child Ming Fan really deserved full marks!

Having just entered his apprenticeship, Luo Binghe had been full of joy and gratitude. But now that he’d been splashed with a head full of tea for no reason, his heart had been wholly chilled and quenched, as if he’d taken a bucket of ice water to the face, complete with ice cubes.

He blankly remained kneeling in place, eyes unblinking. During this silence, two teardrops rolled down his cheeks.

This was Luo Binghe’s first cry since he personally buried his mother. It would also be the last time he cried at Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. After this, no matter what humiliation he suffered, no matter what “Shen Qingqiu” did to him while venting his twisted feelings, Luo Binghe’s tears never fell unrestrained in the way they did today.

Shen Qingqiu crouched before him, but when he raised his sleeves, they passed right through Luo Binghe. He was unable to touch him, unable to hug him. He was completely helpless to even wipe away his tears. His heart ached and throbbed to the point that he wished for death.

Despite knowing Luo Binghe couldn’t hear him, he still said, “Don’t cry, hm?”

Luo Binghe stared down at his knees, and the fists resting on his legs slowly clenched. His tears dripped faster, the drops splashing onto his lapels.

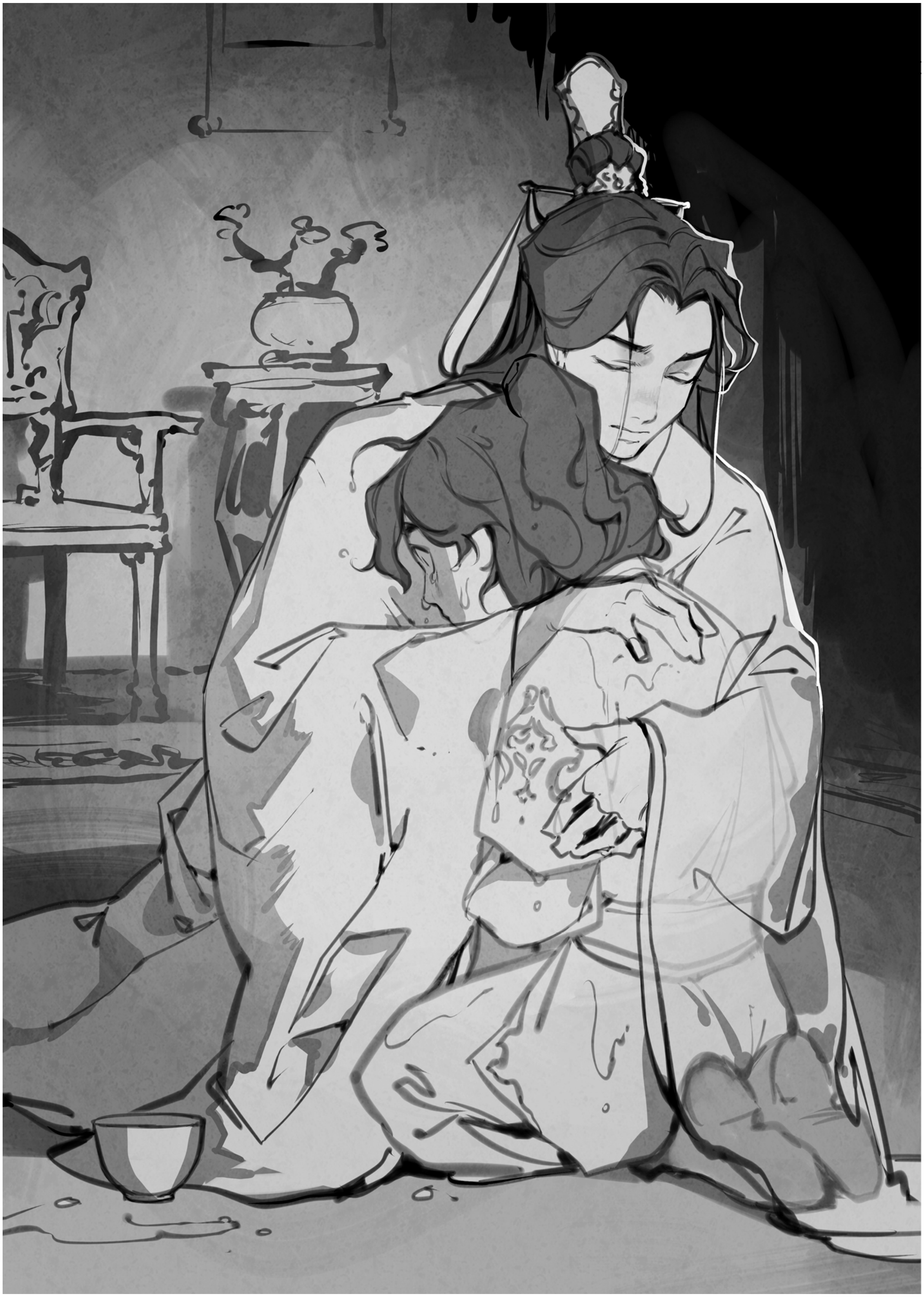
“Shizun will never hit you again.” Shen Qingqiu fruitlessly wiped at his cheeks and coaxed him. “So don’t cry.”

Luo Binghe raised a hand and rubbed at his eyes, then carefully picked up the teacup on the ground before placing it to the side. Clutching that jade pendant to his chest, he corrected his kneeling posture.

Shen Qingqiu knew what Luo Binghe was thinking at this moment. Surely he hadn’t understood the rules and had done something wrong, angering the peak lord. That was why he’d been given this punishment. As a disciple, kneeling for his shizun was also something he should do.

Looking at those subtle movements of his, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help but kneel as well so that they were face-to-face. He reached out, tightly enveloping the entirety of Luo Binghe’s small body in a phantom embrace.

His eyes slid shut, and the world descended into darkness.



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When he next opened them, what filled his vision instead was a white bed curtain, its corners decorated with tassels.

At the sudden change in scenery, Shen Qingqiu froze in place, surprised and unable to react—at least not before he heard Yue Qingyuan's voice beside him.

"Awake?"

Shen Qingqiu mechanically blinked a couple times. His throat felt a bit dry, but he forced out his voice. "Zhangmen-shixiong."

Yue Qingyuan was sitting next to his bed. He watched Shen Qingqiu for a while, then said, "You kept calling Luo Binghe's name."

"Oh."

"While crying."

Shen Qingqiu wiped at his face. Other than sweat, he did in fact feel another type of liquid. Tears were truly infectious.

After a pause, he guiltily said, "Shixiong, let me explain…"

Explain what? What kind of convincing reason could he give for the reality that was "the Qing Jing Peak Lord was crying while calling his disciple's name in a dream"?!

At the sight of Shen Qingqiu unwilling to speak, Yue Qingyuan sighed. "It's fine. It's enough that you're awake. No need to explain."

Shen Qingqiu awkwardly sat up. Suddenly, he thought this scene was a little familiar. The first time he'd woken in this world, Yue Qingyuan had also been at his bedside, watching over him.

Yue Qingyuan studied his complexion. "You slept for five days. Do you wish to continue sleeping?"

Five days! Shen Qingqiu almost fell over right there.

Plot hole-filling completion rate for target "Shen Jiu": 70 percent.

Only seventy percent complete? Wait, other than the ten percent lost due to the incomplete memory incident, where was the remaining twenty? Where had it gone?!

There was no time to give it more thought. Shen Qingqiu first grabbed Yue Qingyuan. “Zhangmen-shixiong, the first day of snow, the Luo River!”

Realizing that he was too agitated and his words were incoherent, Shen Qingqiu composed himself, transforming his expression into something calm and stern. “I mean…that it’s highly probable that Tianlang-Jun will choose that time and location to use Xin Mo to create a portal when he begins to merge the two realms.”

“How do you know?” asked Yue Qingyuan.

Shen Qingqiu was stuck again. How could he say that it was because it’d been written in the original text that these would be the most suitable time and location? “I was in Tianlang-Jun’s hands for a while.”

“And he told you just like that?”

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t come up with an explanation on the spot, so he could only forge ahead. “Please, Zhangmen-shixiong, you have to believe me.”

Yue Qingyuan gazed at him for a while, then closed his eyes for another long moment. Afterward, he stood up and gently said, “Rest first. Leave this issue to your fellow sect members.”

Rest. Did he mean sleep? Shen Qingqiu had already slept for five days!

Only *Proud Immortal Demon Way* would shrug at the idea of a cultivator at Core Formation stage sleeping so much. *I dare you to try writing this in another Zhongdian Literature novel! The author would be mocked until even his mother couldn’t recognize him!*

Once Yue Qingyuan’s footsteps faded, Shen Qingqiu tumbled off the bed, searching everywhere for his outer robe. As he spun around haphazardly, he failed to notice someone approaching him from behind, and a hand covered his eyes.

Shen Qingqiu automatically struck out with his elbow. “Who is it?!”

Who else would have the guts to play such a stupid trick, let alone the interest? His hand was firmly caught in a grasp, and a familiar voice spoke by his ear. “Why doesn’t Shizun guess?”

What was the point of guessing when he’d already opened his mouth and called him “Shizun”? Shen Qingqiu was rolling his eyes when the person behind him suddenly grabbed his waist, causing them both to tumble onto the bamboo couch to the side. Its bamboo twigs crackled under their combined weight. The object blocking his eyes moved away. Sure enough, it was Luo Binghe.

That hand moved to cover Shen Qingqiu’s mouth instead. “Don’t blink. Shizun’s eyelashes are so long. They tickled me too much and now both my hand and heart are itchy.”

You’re the one with long eyelashes! The person with the longest eyelashes is you!

Shen Qingqiu continuously blinked dozens of times, expressing his anger.

Luo Binghe smiled, then kissed his eyelids softly. “Don’t shout. If someone from Qing Jing Peak discovers us, Shizun’s prestigious reputation would truly be ruined.”

What reputation? It’d long since been ruined by this unfilial disciple.

Luo Binghe kissed his way down Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. “I said that I would come for you. It’s been so many days since our last meeting. Did Shizun miss me?”

According to the standard response Shen Qingqiu had in mind, first he should knee Luo Binghe in the belly, then kick this unfilial disciple away and tidy up his appearance before finally delivering a cold and aloof, “I didn’t.”

But somehow, when he thought back to that recent memory of Luo Binghe kneeling alone in the Bamboo House, silently picking up the teacup on the floor, his leg wouldn’t obey him at all.

Shen Qingqiu’s breathing also seemed to tremble against Luo Binghe’s palm. He closed his eyes and nodded.

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Chapter 20:
Impending War

LUO BINGHE HAD ALREADY BRACED HIMSELF to be kicked off the couch, so Shen Qingqiu nodding caught him completely off guard. He went stiff in his perch atop Shen Qingqiu, and his expression froze as well.

Only then did Shen Qingqiu realize what he had done—what that nod of his meant. He was filled with the urge to eradicate all witnesses, as well as off himself in shame.

No, no, no, no, no, no—it's not what you think, let me explain!

But Luo Binghe didn't give him the chance. The arm around Shen Qingqiu's waist tightened, and his voice dropped. "You really missed me?"

Shen Qingqiu frowned at how tightly Luo Binghe squeezed him.

Luo Binghe persisted breathlessly and tirelessly. "You really did?"

You're covering my mouth—even if I wanted to answer, I couldn't!

Meaning he could only choose to nod or shake his head.

To mess with him, Shen Qingqiu alternated between nodding his head and shaking it.

"So which is it, you did or didn't?" Luo Binghe asked, now urgent.

As he looked close to tears, Shen Qingqiu was left with no recourse but to admit defeat.

He was hit with a bizarre feeling that he was martyring himself. With his entire face on the line, he dawdled for a while longer before finally nodding once.

This time, Shen Qingqiu saw everything clearly. At the moment of his confirmation, Luo Binghe's breathing came to a stop.

A small, weak spark glimmered to life in his eyes before it rapidly spread like a raging wildfire through his entire face and body.

Just when Shen Qingqiu thought Luo Binghe was about to burst into tears of joy, Luo Binghe suddenly burrowed into him, pressing his face into the gap between Shen Qingqiu's lapels. The hand covering his mouth slowly fell away.

Then he started to drop tiny, quick kisses all over the corner of Shen Qingqiu's mouth, not unlike a little chick pecking for grain.

Now that he was finally able to breathe properly, Shen Qingqiu tossed out two words from between gritted teeth: "What nonsense."

"I also missed you," Luo Binghe muttered. "Really, really missed you. There wasn't a single moment when I didn't miss you…"

Shen Qingqiu slowly released the breath he'd been holding in his chest. He lay back on the couch like a dead fish, staring up at the Bamboo House's ceiling in despair. After a long moment, he finally sighed. "Then why didn't you come look for this master inside the dream realm these past few days?"

Luo Binghe stared at him with dark, moist eyes. "Wouldn't Shizun find me annoying?"

Pestering him during the day, then pestering him more in his dreams at night. Shen Qingqiu spent twenty-four hours a day staring at this face—of course it was annoying!

But somehow, while he wasn't paying attention, he'd become used to the pestering. Like how now, even though Luo Binghe was practically on top of him, Shen Qingqiu shockingly didn't find it unacceptable…

Exactly how had they reached this point? Wasn't it becoming a little much?!

"You know that it's annoying, yet you don't show the least bit of restraint," Shen Qingqiu said dryly.

"It's not the first time Shizun's complained about me, so it's fine. I'll accept that I'm annoying."

At these words, Shen Qingqiu's heart couldn't help but throb a little. Just how far did Luo Binghe's love for him go?

Even back during Luo Binghe's early days on Cang Qiong Mountain, when he'd suffered that awful treatment, the moment Shen Qingqiu expressed the tiniest kindness, he had wiped all the prior harm he'd suffered from his mind and accepted Shen Qingqiu into the depths of his heart without a moment of hesitation.

Then Shen Qingqiu unknowingly crushed that glass heart of his, and Luo Binghe picked up the pieces one by one like an abused young wife, gluing them back together—whereupon he handed it back to Shen Qingqiu, full of hope and expectations, only for it to be crushed again, then glued back together, etc.…

"Whenever Shizun is at Cang Qiong Mountain," Luo Binghe said quietly, "when Shizun's with other people, he always smiles so happily. So I thought that you wouldn't miss me."

Immortal Master Shen's badass act had become habit by now, especially when he was at Cang Qiong Mountain. The most he offered was an enigmatic, ambiguous expression that both seemed to be a smile and not; otherwise it was a smile that didn't reach his eyes and left people guessing. Or excluding that, it was a perfunctory, fake smile. Exactly when had he "smiled so happily"?

"Nonsense," Shen Qingqiu objected.

"It's true that Shizun's smiles are never very wide," Luo Binghe said. "But of course I know when Shizun is smiling within his heart."

You're lying on top of someone and acting spoiled while playing with a strand of their hair. Are you a little girl?!

Shen Qingqiu rolled his eyes. "Yes. You're the roundworm in my stomach."[10]

"I don't want to be a roundworm."

Shen Qingqiu smacked the hand playing with his hair like it was a mosquito. "Then what do you want to be? You tell me, just who has this master smiled at?"

By the end of his question, he was giving that wandering hand a smack every couple of words, but still it wasn't deterred.

Luo Binghe actually began to count them off. "Lots of people. Liu…-shishu, Sect Leader Yue, Shang Qinghua, Ming Fan, Ning-shijie, Xian Shu

Peak's disciples—and Wan Jian Peak's, Qian Cao Peak's, Qiong Ding Peak's, and Bai Zhan Peak's—the mountain guards, the stair sweepers…"

He wouldn't even let the mountain guards and stair sweepers go! Just how deep was this child's grudge?! The entirety of Cang Qiong Mountain was about to drown beneath this demon-import super-fragrant mature vinegar!

"That 'shishu' of yours was much too insincere," Shen Qingqiu criticized him. "You're not allowed to use that tone again in the future."

"Well, when he lectures me, he calls me 'little beast' or 'ingrate,'" Luo Binghe complained resentfully. "He's plenty sincere then."

Shen Qingqiu couldn't help but burst into laughter. He picked up the fan next to the couch and rapped Luo Binghe's forehead. "Is he wrong? When you have the gall to put your paws on even your shizun, what could you be if not a little beast?"

His words came out so smoothly that he didn't realize he hadn't been sufficiently careful with this response. There was a lilt to his words, the tail end lifting together with the corner of lips, neither light nor heavy. There was even a frivolity to his tone, with no propriety at all.

As Luo Binghe looked down at Shen Qingqiu, he took in this sight, feeling like a nameless, agitating fire burned within his abdomen and the heart in his chest. He unconsciously moved and slid his thigh between Shen Qingqiu's. Then, fearing that Shen Qingqiu would notice and kick him off the couch, he quickly moved his head over, letting Shen Qingqiu rap it with his fan to his heart's content. "Even if I am a little beast, I am only Shizun's little beast and no one else's. So no one else is allowed to call me that."

At those words, Shen Qingqiu felt like he'd been force-fed a liter of sour plum soup. The nauseating sappiness was making his hair stand on end, and he almost snapped his fan right in two. He hastily prodded at Luo Binghe's chest, wanting him off. "Get up."

In order to talk about proper things, first they needed to assume proper sitting positions. While they were on top of each other like this, any topic, no matter how proper, would become improper. Luo Binghe was reluctant, but he still pulled himself up to sit on the end of the couch.

After sleeping for five days, Shen Qingqiu felt like his waist was about to snap. Thankfully, he could finally straighten it now. He thought that his appearance was that of a frowning, grumpy old man massaging and kneading his waist and legs, but those who saw him wouldn't have come away with the same impression. His hair hung loose and slightly messy around his shoulders, while his collar lay askew, exposing a fair white shoulder and leaving his throat and collarbone in clear view. Furthermore, because he'd just been tumbling about on the couch, there was a soft flush to his cheeks as he frowned, head lowered and kneading his waist. At this sight, anyone with unruly thoughts would only become more unruly.

Luo Binghe watched him, eyes unblinking, then scooted closer and massaged his waist slowly.

Shen Qingqiu was satisfied. "Good boy. How considerate."

"I have many more considerate traits that Shizun doesn't know about."

What a show-off.

"When you face off against Tianlang-Jun," Luo Binghe continued, "if Shizun needs any help, feel free to call me."

Shen Qingqiu had been avoiding the topic of Tianlang-Jun this whole time for fear of upsetting Luo Binghe. He hadn't expected Luo Binghe himself to be the one to bring it up. This was a little *too* considerate. He pondered for a moment, then said while deliberating, "Your father…"

Luo Binghe pressed his face into Shen Qingqiu's shoulder and said stuffily, "I have no father. I only have Shizun."

Shen Qingqiu was silent.

Why does it sound like I've *become your father?*

He waved away this feeling of defeat and said seriously, "If you're pushing yourself, don't force it."

No matter what kind of weirdo Tianlang-Jun was, in the end he was Luo Binghe's dad. He was also someone Luo Binghe had once yearned for, even if the real person couldn't have been more different from the mental image in Luo Binghe's daydreams.

Luo Binghe didn’t stop his hands and said indifferently, “I’m not pushing myself.”

Shen Qingqiu studied him closely. True enough, this was…indeed the expression of someone who was completely willing to help with a real campaign. There was no trace of Luo Binghe fighting his own feelings.

In all honesty, this was a good thing. Though a son joining the effort to screw over his own father wasn’t too filial, if Luo Binghe really was willing to cooperate with the cultivation world to overcome Tianlang-Jun, not only would the Human Realm gain a powerful force of help, but Luo Binghe would be able to farm a massive amount of righteous image points. Then Shen Qingqiu would be able to compensate for the minus points he’d received at Zhao Hua Monastery.

Just now, when Yue Qingyuan left, he’d said that Shen Qingqiu should rest properly and that he should “leave this issue to his fellow sect members,” making it very clear that he didn’t want Shen Qingqiu participating in the war. Shen Qingqiu muttered to himself, “Zhangmen-shixiong might not allow me to take part in the battle. The first day of snow at the Luo River. You should keep this time and location in mind.”

Luo Binghe’s hands on his waist lightened, and he said gently, “Sometimes I feel like Shizun understands certain things far too well.”

Shen Qingqiu’s heart thumped hard against his rib cage.

“Like that time at the Holy Mausoleum,” Luo Binghe continued. “Shizun had obviously never been in the Holy Mausoleum before, but he seemed to know the layout of the graves and the monsters guarding the mausoleum like the back of his hand, and he even took advantage of them easily. This disciple was truly amazed and impressed.”

Shen Qingqiu deliberately tried to downplay it. “Qing Jing Peak has accumulated so many records with every generation. Those aren’t blank sheets of paper; reading through them exhaustively has its uses.”

Luo Binghe only responded with an, “Oh.” Having finished the massage, his hands began to carefully comb Shen Qingqiu’s hair, which hung loose down his back. “This disciple has done some reading of those records as well, but I didn’t see quite that much. As expected, I have a long way to go to reach Shizun.”

How had he forgotten? Luo Binghe was a Grade-A student among Grade-A students, to a terrifyingly impossible extent. If Luo Binghe said he'd "done some reading," that meant he had taken those piles of dusty old books and memorized them to the point that he could recite them from cover to cover. So of course he'd know that there weren't any such "uses" within.

This child wasn't Yue Qingyuan. If Shen Qingqiu didn't want to say something, Yue Qingyuan wouldn't keep questioning him. Luo Binghe, however, would absolutely latch on and ask about something until he hit the heart of the matter. He wasn't that easy to dupe. The gears within Shen Qingqiu's brain turned and turned, trying to think of some means of talking around this.

Suddenly, Ning Yingying's voice came from outside the Bamboo House. "Shizun, are you awake? May Yingying come in?"

Good girl, what an obedient disciple!

"You should leave first," Shen Qingqiu said in a low voice.

Luo Binghe's hands paused. "Why do I have to leave and not them?"

Ming Fang's voice came as well. "Shizun, several shishus have arrived," he said. "Is now a good time for you to get up?"

Why is everyone coming all at once?! Shen Qingqiu leapt off the couch and pushed Luo Binghe to the window.

Luo Binghe turned his head while walking to say, "So Shizun likes to be sneaky about it…"

Shen Qingqiu again rapped his forehead with the fan. "Just who's the one sneaking around? Whose fault is it?"

Why must he always make every situation look like a secret affair?!

Luo Binghe silently flipped out the window, but then reached in again to grab Shen Qingqiu. He said gently, "Shizun, once everything calms down, will you leave with me?"

Shen Qingqiu couldn't quite relinquish his own face. "This master is still the Qing Jing Peak Lord," he said reservedly.

If Luo Binghe wanted to see him, he could just come and look for him. Why did Shen Qingqiu have to leave with him? He refused to give the *Regret of Chunshan* more material.

Luo Binghe sighed. “I thought you’d say that.”

With the window shut, the Bamboo House’s door opened instead. Qi Qingqi’s voice reached Shen Qingqiu before her person. She lifted the curtains, revealing her bright, lovely face. “You become more delicate each day,” she said, lips pursed. “Did the few staff strikes you received at Zhao Hua Monastery injure you that badly? Were you coughing up blood or what? Sleeping for five days in one go!”

Shen Qingqiu turned and said, only partly insincere, “Don’t be like this, Qi-shimei. You’ve always known that my body is weak.”

Qi Qingqi humphed. “I’ve always known that you cause a lot of trouble, that’s true.”

Behind her followed Liu Mingyan, who bowed after entering the house, and after her came Liu Qingge. Ming Fan and Ning Yingying walked together with Mu Qingfang at the rear. The Bamboo House, which was neither large nor small, was suddenly brimming with people. Shame filled Shen Qingqiu. Luckily Luo Binghe had already left through the window, otherwise they couldn’t have concealed him.

Mu Qingfang smiled. “I told you that Shen-shixiong’s complexion was good—that there were no abnormalities and he was really only asleep. Now do you believe me?”

Shen Qingqiu expressed his embarrassment, then showed the peak lords to their seats. He noted that Liu Qingge had been scanning the room continuously after entering, gaze intense. “Liu-shidi, I’m over here.”

Liu Qingge withdrew his gaze and turned toward Shen Qingqiu. “Who was here just now?”

Shen Qingqiu specifically pointed at a seat for him. “Zhangmen-shixiong just left.”

He picked up the tea kettle on the table. Ming Fan hurried over to help, but Shen Qingqiu waved him off, making it clear that there was no need to intervene. As Shen Qingqiu personally served everyone tea, Liu

Qingge finally sat down and picked up his teacup. He took a sip and spoke no further.

“Of course Zhangmen-shixiong would come,” Qi Qingqi said. “By that expression of yours, Liu-shidi, I thought you were talking about Luo Binghe.”

Though the speaker didn’t mean anything, the listener felt it. Shen Qingqiu’s cheeks ached, and he gave a fake smile. “How could that be?”

Qi Qingqi put the teacup down heavily and gave him a meaningful glance. “Indeed. How could that be? If that bastard Luo Binghe still has the gall to come to Cang Qiong Mountain, he’ll see how we send him packing!”

“First you must be capable of sending him packing,” Mu Qingfang said from the seat beside her, hands tucked into his sleeves.

Shen Qingqiu chuckled aloud, leaving her no face.

Qi Qingqi pointed at him. “You laugh? You still have the face to laugh! You’re the biggest headache! Shen Qingqiu, I’ll tell you right now, it’s a good thing you returned with Shixiong and Shidi this time. If you’d gone and left with Luo Binghe without a word again, I’d be the first in line to discipline you. Then we’d see if you could still fumble around!”

This was clearly an expression of concern, yet she worded it so savagely. All that was missing was her grabbing Shen Qingqiu by the scruff of his neck. Everyone in the room clustered around them; the ones watching for entertainment continued watching, the ones drinking tea continued drinking, and the ones eating melon seeds continued eating. (How come Liu Mingyan wouldn’t remove her veil even when eating melon seeds?)

Shen Qingqiu was rather afraid of Qi Qingqi and hastily changed the topic. “How is Zhangmen-shixiong? Did that injury he sustained completely heal?”

“He’s about recovered,” Mu Qingfang said. However, though he said “recovered,” he still looked like he wanted to sigh.

Qi Qingqi humphed again. “If not for how Shixiong refuses to draw his sword except as a last resort, on top of how he forcefully broke his seclusion after hearing of the siege, Luo Binghe wouldn’t have had his way so easily. If you’d just taken a little longer to show up, you might have been able to see Shixiong draw Xuan Su.”

Anticipation and excitement filled Shen Qingqiu’s heart at these words. One must understand that regardless of whether it was the original work or in this world, he had never witnessed a scene in which Xuan Su left its sheath. Who knew what Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky was thinking either, keeping it secret at all costs and refusing to write it? All talk and no action: he’d built that sword up in great detail again and again, then at the very end—a scam! With not a single thing to show for himself, Yue Qingyuan was pierced with ten thousand arrows and perished. Goodbye.

Ever since Ning Yingying entered the room, she'd stood at the side with her head lowered. Shen Qingqiu beckoned her over. "What's wrong?"

Ning Yingying slowly walked up to him and raised her head. Her eyes were as red as a little rabbit's, her voice congested as she mumbled, "Shizun, now that you've come back, don't leave ever again…okay?"

She'd been crying. Shen Qingqiu was stunned. He wasn't someone with particularly active tear ducts; at most he would shed a few tears for biological reasons. So how come his disciples were all the type to turn into weeping beauties at the drop of a hat?

Moved by this scene, Ming Fan became sorrowful and began to howl as well. "Shizun—"

Though this image couldn't be any further from that of a weeping beauty!

Qi Qingqi never let a chance to lecture him pass her by. "Look! Look at your disciples. Does your heart not ache? You don't have just the one! Yet you only dote on that ingrate. Do you care about the others at all?"

Shen Qingqiu patted Ning Yingying's back, offering her some small comfort while defending himself. "Since when have I only doted on one?"

Liu Qingge drank his tea until only one-third remained. Gaze lowered, he said, "Now that you're back, stay. Don't leave again."

"Mm," Shen Qingqiu said succinctly.

With this answer of his, Qi Qingqi was completely satisfied. Liu Qingge was about to say something else when his brows furrowed and his murderous aura flared.

Everyone in the room sensed the change in his demeanor. Without thinking, their hands went to their swords. Liu Qingge suddenly stood and flashed up to the window. Shen Qingqiu's heart leapt to his throat, where it hung suspended.

Liu Qingge abruptly pushed opened both sides of the window. Outside, sparse stars and a bright moon hung above, while a dense bamboo forest lay below. There was no one to be seen.

Of course Luo Binghe wouldn’t have continued to foolishly idle there. He must have left long ago. The mood within the room quickly relaxed.

“Liu-shixiong, what are you looking at?” Mu Qingfang asked.

However, Liu Qingge didn’t turn back. Instead, he reached out as if catching something that was falling from the sky. After a long moment, he pulled his hand back and turned around. “It’s snowing.”

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Shen Qingqiu lay wide-awake the entire night. The next day, the moment he heard the alarm bell’s clamor, he dashed out of the Bamboo House.

The ringing grew increasingly urgent, both loud and insistent, its echo resounding without pause, lingering and reverberating throughout the entirety of Cang Qiong Mountain’s summit. Disciples from every peak streamed toward Qiong Ding Peak via the Rainbow Bridges for the assembly. The area outside Qiong Ding Peak’s main hall was crowded with people, yet it was dead silent.

Once Shen Qingqiu finished settling in everyone from Qing Jing Peak, he entered the hall. A white crystal mirror over three meters high stood to one side. Besides a single An Ding Peak disciple, who was stepping in to handle logistics, all the other peak lords had already arrived. They stood before the mirror, expressions grave.

Reflected within was a vast and tranquil river, flanked by verdant mountains and green fields on both sides. Embedded within those fields were scattered white roofs, some in rows and some alone.

“The sky above the Luo River’s middle reaches,” said Yue Qingyuan.

Above that scenery, a dark cavernous mass had appeared: a gloomy and treacherous mountain ridge, like a black skull pitted with crevices, pierced through the clouds. It crept forth from the roiling storm, hanging inverted as it stared emptily down below.

That was the Demon Realm’s Mai Gu Ridge.

“From what we’ve heard, it began last night,” said Yue Qingyuan. “Initially one could only see a mass of rock. Within two hours, one could discern a mountain ridge.”

“In less than two hours?” a peak lord said in shock. “That’s…far too fast!”

No, that was the normal speed for such a merge. Sure enough, Tianlang-Jun had selected what the original work had called “the best time and location” to act. If everything proceeded according to expectations, after half a day, this phenomena would begin to occur everywhere. Within two days, the two realms would be completely integrated, as if one had torn up two complete and separate pictures, then haphazardly spliced them together to create a new image riddled with pits and scars.

Liu Qingge stood with his arms crossed, Cheng Luan in hand. “So we must be faster.”

“All peak lords, select two-thirds of your inner disciples to move out with you,” said Yue Qingyuan. “Arrive at the Luo River’s middle reaches within an hour.”

Having received the sect leader’s command, the peak lords dispersed in a flurry. In order to arrive within an hour, they had less than ten minutes to make preparations, so naturally they had to be quick. Shen Qingqiu was also ready to head back and make his selection, but Yue Qingyuan called him back. “You stay here.”

Shen Qingqiu turned his head. “Shixiong, you know I must go.”

“Shidi, other than the first snow and the Luo River, what else do you know?”

“In order to stop the merge, we must first remove Xin Mo,” Shen Qingqiu said slowly. “It’s been inserted somewhere into the skull of Mai Gu Ridge. Tianlang-Jun must be there to supply it with power.”

That meant that the only solutions were: 1) Destroy Xin Mo or 2) Kill Tianlang-Jun.

“Stay here on watch,” Yue Qingyuan insisted.

Shen Qingqiu was about to say something, but Yue Qingyuan lifted his hand and formed a gesture, as if about to cast a binding technique to directly seal Shen Qingqiu within Qiong Ding Hall.

The sect leader was going to play hardball!

Shen Qingqiu's back tensed. He didn't know whether to reach for Xiu Ya. At this moment, a staggered chorus of shocked cries came from outside the hall. Both of them rushed outside and looked toward where the disciples on the field were pointing. Shen Qingqiu drew in a faint, chilled breath.

In the sky over Cang Qiong Mountain, surging clouds billowed like a furious, roiling ocean, their masses suffused with a bloody glow. Ray after ray of red light pierced the horizon, and boulders wrapped in flames descended one by one like giant, blazing meteors, hurtling straight toward Cang Qiong Mountain.

Unperturbed, Yue Qingyuan lifted his hand and formed a gesture. Xuan Su screamed forth still in its sheath, smashing those boulders into a fine powder. Like the aftermath of bursting fireworks, tiny particles drifted down, still carrying some residual warmth.

Within the red clouds glowing like a volcanic crater, one could faintly make out countless arms and howling heads, struggling and heaving, twisted in a thousand expressions of agony, like a scene from hell.

Fuck it all, it's the Endless Abyss—Cang Qiong Mountain really hit the jackpot! Shen Qingqiu roared internally. *Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky! You had the stones to write an interdimensional merge,* and *the stones to explicitly write that Cang Qiong Mountain's location would just happen to merge with the Endless Abyss?!*

After this wave, who knew when or if the next wave of assaults would come? Who knew how much time they had before the Twelve Peaks merged with the Endless Abyss to become a sea of fire and lava, a hell on earth? No one could stay on Cang Qiong Mountain, not anymore.

"Request assistance from the masters of Zhao Hua Monastery," Yue Qingyuan said to that An Ding Peak disciple in charge of logistics. Then he turned and raised his voice. "Hear me, disciples on watch: the moment the barrier breaks, drop everything and leave the mountain immediately!"

The thousand-plus disciples on the field answered as one: "Yes!"

Yue Qingyuan turned his head. “Qingqiu-shidi, head to the Luo River with them.”

Liu Qingge had finished picking out his disciples and returned. “What about you, Sect Leader?”

“I’ll hold them off while I wait for Zhao Hua Monastery’s assistance. I’ll be with you right after.”

“Zhangmen-shixiong, can you handle this by yourself?” Shen Qingqiu asked. “Or I could stay behind…”

Yue Qingyuan actually smiled. “When asked to stay, you leave. Yet when told to leave, you try to stay. Xiao… Shidi, really.”

Liu Qingge grabbed Shen Qingqiu and dragged him away with a succinct: “Let’s go. If he says he’ll be right there, he will be.”

With a calamity imminent, Cang Qiong Mountain finally gained the self-awareness expected of a cultivation novel’s number one sect. At last, no longer were they so carefree as to plod along by carriage or boat. Thousands of swords swept through the sky at lightning speed. If anyone below looked up, they would have seen a dazzling array of lights, as if they gazed at the Milky Way itself.

It was a tremendously magnificent scene. Unfortunately, those eerie mountain rocks emerging from the sky left no one with the heart to admire this rare and splendid spectacle.

As expected, An Ding Peak was unparalleled when it came to logistics, possessing terrifying efficiency. The dispatch barrier troops from Zhao Hua Monastery clearly arrived with great speed and reinforced the barrier, for Yue Qingyuan also extracted himself with extraordinary swiftness and just as swiftly caught up. In less than an hour, they all arrived at the Luo River’s middle reaches.

Because of the great number of people, they were forced to partition themselves into groups and descend in turns. Both banks of the Luo River had already long been crowded with cultivators who’d received the news, observed the phenomena, and come to investigate, their various sect colors intermingling in a mosaic. The Daoists from Tian Yi Temple were busy evacuating the ordinary civilians by the Luo River, while Wu Wang and Wu Chen walked in front as they led Zhao Hua Monastery to the assembly.

Yue Qingyuan cupped his hands, deferential. “Many thanks to the masters for the disciples you sent to resolve our crisis. Without you, Cang Qiong Mountain’s thousand-year legacy might have come to an end today and been unable to survive.”

That monk Wu Wang always had a lot to say, but today he kept his expression stony and remained silent. Instead, it was Master Wu Chen who wiped away his sweat and said, “Amitabha. It was not only your honored sect whose thousand-year legacy was at risk. Zhao Hua Monastery too was in danger of falling to this plight.”

Yue Qingyuan was a little surprised. “Was that the case? Masters, you sent hundreds of your monastery’s barrier disciples to Cang Qiong Mountain. Did you have enough to defend the monastery?”

Shen Qingqiu was also skeptical. Was Zhao Hua Monastery really so enlightened that they’d help other sects even if it meant harming themselves?

Wu Wang’s expression worsened further.

Master Wu Chen realized that he wouldn’t talk, so he could only continue speaking in his place. “This… This is truly difficult to say. It wasn’t saved by our own strength, but with someone else’s great assistance.”

Yue Qingyuan was bemused. “It couldn’t be Tian Yi Temple.”

Tian Yi Temple had always possessed a reputation for being lax and carefree. They were the most disorganized and undisciplined of the major sects. On top of that, they had no great accomplishments when it came to barrier arts, so if Zhao Hua Monastery really had survived thanks to Tian Yi Temple’s assistance, that would certainly be quite remarkable.

Master Wu Chen shook his head. “It was Huan Hua Palace.”

Shen Qingqiu’s fan paused and he blurted out, “Huan Hua Palace? Then wasn’t that…”

Wu Wang looked rather green. “Correct. It was Luo Binghe.”

Suddenly, a soft, short laugh drifted to them from the side. “I dare not call it great assistance,” a clear and ringing voice said courteously. “If it must be said, I was only doing it for Shizun’s sake.”

Everyone present was a cultivator with supremely sharp senses, so no matter if they were near or far, at this moment they all turned toward Shen Qingqiu. Hundreds of pairs of eyes and gazes of every kind surrounded him from all directions.

Shen Qingqiu opened his fan, silently using it to conceal part of his face.

Luo Binghe strolled over, and a gust of river wind blew against his profile, rippling the hem of his black robes. The sword at his waist was Zheng Yang. Behind him, Mobei-Jun walked to his left, chin slightly raised, while Sha Hualing's alluring figure was to his right. The long-unseen Huan Hua Palace disciples followed closely behind, and at the very end of their train was a small troop of demon soldiers in black armor. Shang Qinghua was mixed into the crowd, appearing here and there. He darted back and forth, movements as slippery as an eel and completely incongruous with the scene. The moment he and Shen Qingqiu came face-to-face, hooks seemed to fire from their eyes, entangling their gazes as a thousand swords and knives shot back and forth between them. It was quite exciting.

Luo Binghe cut through the crowd, stately and grand, then placed himself as the third party, standing at the last point of the triangle. A brilliant variety of countenances were displayed across the crowd, enough to compose a whole custom emoji set—especially those from Cang Qiong Mountain. There had been a time when they'd fought Huan Hua Palace on sight, so now upon meeting an old nemesis, their gazes were particularly furious. But given what Zhao Hua Monastery had said, currently they were not enemies but allies, so they could only swallow down those feelings and show restraint.

"Are the two masters serious with this?" Qi Qingqi said warily.

Luo Binghe smiled. "Is Peak Lord Qi worried that Zhao Hua Monastery has also been…ah, ruined by my influence?"

As another tussle was about to break out, Shen Qingqiu hastily said, "Of course Master Wu Chen's words wouldn't contain falsehoods."

As he spoke, it was like the hundreds of gazes that had originally diverted from him had been agitated, and as one, they all swept toward him again. Qi Qingqi glared at him viciously, her expression like that of someone who resented his uselessness, or of a parent upset with their ~~daughter's~~ child's boyfriend.

Luo Binghe's gaze was fixed upon him, and he spoke as if no one else was present. "Shizun, we haven't seen each other in so long; this disciple missed you dearly."

Didn't we meet just last night?

If anyone else said that they'd "missed someone dearly," everyone on the scene would definitely break out in goosebumps, but Luo Binghe's setting was stuck on "no matter what he says, people will never feel disturbed," so the crowd's attention failed to shift toward him. Shen Qingqiu, however, was personally experiencing the cold and judgmental stares of a crowd; it was all he could do to make a tactful sound of acknowledgment.

A small smile lingered on Luo Binghe's lips. "The southern and northern borders have been locked in an endless conflict," he continued. "I am the leader of the northern border. We don't agree with this act of merger, and therefore this time we're willing to lend you our strength, to join hands to repel the enemy."

Watching Luo Binghe stand with his hands behind him, dignified and proper—who could have guessed that beneath this exterior was the personality of a young maiden, one who loved to lie atop others while crying and acting spoiled? Who would believe you if you told them?!

"Forgive this Yue's suspicions, but when we last met at Zhao Hua Monastery, we parted on unhappy terms," Yue Qingyuan said calmly. "Now Palace Master Luo suddenly wishes to join hands with the cultivation world to repel his own birth father…"

"I only do things for one person," Luo Binghe said shortly. "I neither know nor care about anyone else."

He hadn't said who the person was this time, but did it matter? Was there a point?

On this snowy winter day, Shen Qingqiu fanned himself so hard, his literature-club-appropriate folding fan almost turned into an electric one. If only he could blow all those gazes still aimed at him to somewhere beyond the nine heavens.

One of the sect leaders let out a dry laugh. “Peak Lord Shen has truly raised a good disciple. He’s become our cultivation world’s tremendous fortune.”

Though he said “raised a good disciple,” the tone was no different from the way he might say “married a good husband.” When Shen Qingqiu heard this, his fanning began to carry a hint of murderous intent.

Wu Wang looked like he was itching to beat these two degenerate creatures to death with his staff.

“If Benefactor Luo wishes to help us, there could be no better outcome,” Master Wu Chen said hastily. “We request that Sect Leader Yue handle overall management of the situation.”

The sects had always silently recognized Yue Qingyuan as a capable pillar during times of crises, and now he automatically slipped into the task of formation and coordination. “I request that Zhao Hua Monastery have their remaining manpower set up a barrier and impede Mai Gu Ridge’s descent. It must be prevented from making contact with the river surface.”

Master Wu Chen looked troubled. “Of course we will do our best. However, the Luo River is vast, with a great distance between the two banks. Without a place to stand, the foundations will be unstable and it will be difficult to set up the arrays.”

Yue Qingyuan thought for a bit. “What if our peak’s disciples support you with their swords? Could you set up the arrays in midair?”

“No need to go to that much trouble,” said Luo Binghe.

He tilted his head without speaking, and Mobei-Jun left the ranks by himself, walking to the riverbank. He stepped onto the water surface but did not sink. From where he stood, sturdy ice rapidly spread outward. After a short time, a stretch of water had frozen into ice a meter thick, and that area expanded unceasingly, freezing the swimming fish in place. With only a bit longer, he would probably freeze the entirety of the Luo River’s middle reaches rock solid.

When it came to output, the demon race had a natural advantage. Gasps of surprise as well as expressions of displeasure rose around them. Wu Chen gave continuous thanks, but Luo Binghe showed not a hint of arrogance. He only looked back at Shen Qingqiu, his eyes very bright.

Shen Qingqiu noted that he'd farmed quite a few righteous image points and that the crowd's air of hostility and wariness was no longer as heavy. Satisfied, he couldn't help but say, "Mm. Well done."

A smile bloomed on Luo Binghe's lips. Somehow, Shen Qingqiu's lips too curled upward. When he realized what his face was doing, he immediately tugged the corners of his lips down, managing to control his expression. Internally he wondered, *How come it isn't only tears that are infectious but smiles too?*

Next, Yue Qingyuan delegated tasks. Tian Yi Temple would continue to spread out to locations beyond the Luo River, where more phenomena of the merge were starting to occur. There, they would protect and evacuate civilians.

After them came Cang Qiong Mountain. After pondering for a while, Yue Qingyuan said, "When the first wave of demons from the southern border breaks through, Bai Zhan Peak will meet them."

Only forty people had come from Bai Zhan Peak.

Someone couldn't help but say, "The southern border has a great variety of demonic beasts, each more powerful than the last. Can forty people really hold off the first wave of the assault?"

Imagine doubting the battle ability of those battle fanatics!

Liu Qingge stood with a foot on some rubble, his sword tassel, white sleeves, and black hair dancing wildly in the wind. He didn't answer them directly, only coldly addressed the disciples behind him. "Those who don't kill at least a thousand can go crawling to An Ding Peak."

Those forty answered in unison: "Yes!"

"Don't discriminate against An Ding Peak…" Shang Qinghua muttered feebly.

Logistics above all / Pride goeth before the fall!

Yue Qingyuan continued to make arrangements: Qiong Ding Peak, Xian Shu Peak, Qian Cao Peak… Each had their own station and duties.

Shen Qingqiu saw how carefree Luo Binghe seemed, and he couldn't help but ask, "How many people did you bring? Not going to make assignments?"

The moment he opened his mouth, he felt countless ears pricking up, breaths pausing as they eavesdropped attentively. Even the whispers in the crowd had quieted a fair amount. The lovely Daoist nun triplets nearby let out curious giggles.

"I brought everyone I could," said Luo Binghe. "The assignments are easy." As he spoke, he pointed behind himself at Sha Hualing and Mobei-Jun. "Jiuchong-Jun is hers. The ugly beasts are his."

So you're making the daughter backstab her father again? This was practically…

"Anything else?" Shen Qingqiu asked.

Luo Binghe nodded solemnly. "Yes." His face spread into a smile. "And Shizun is mine."

Coughs sounded all around him, and Shen Qingqiu felt like his face was about to fall off from shame.

He closed his fan with a snap, holding it in hand as he adjusted his expression. "This master has something to say to the former An Ding Peak Lord," he said sternly. "For now, go consult the sect leaders and discuss your plans for receiving the enemy."

He fled right after, not bothering with anyone's response. He grabbed Shang Qinghua and, like lugging a dead pig, dragged him to a tree that was slightly out of the way.

"Why aren't you dead yet?!" said Shen Qingqiu. "You should have died eight hundred chapters ago. Why hasn't Mobei-Jun snapped your neck?!"

Shang Qinghua straightened his collar. "Master Shen, you should have died before me, but you're still running around in perfect health. Can you really say anything?"

Shen Qingqiu rested his forehead on his hand and sucked in a deep breath. "Towards the Sky-bro, 'Great Master,' 'Great Master' Airplane—were you not held enough as a child or something, huh? Huh? The original backstory for 'Shen Qingqiu' that you mentioned was a sicko abusing him in his childhood? Do you really love writing miserable and tragic pasts that much?"

“Tragic characters are more popular,” said Shang Qinghua.

“Bullshit! He got two comment floods yelling for his castration, and you’re telling me that’s being popular?”

“Wasn’t that because I axed the backstory?” Shang Qinghua presented his logical counterargument. “Wasn’t Bing-ge tragic? Wasn’t he popular?”

He still had the gall to use Luo Binghe as an example! Shen Qingqiu whacked him with the fan. “Just how much do you like this trope?”

He thought of Luo Binghe kneeling miserably on the ground as he picked up the teacup, of his small, frail body as he lugged heavy pails of water up and down the mountain stairs. Of his huddled form at night, curled up in the woodshed’s corner and shivering, arms around himself. Whenever Shen Qingqiu thought of these things, his heart clenched, perturbed. He wouldn’t feel better unless he beat someone up—and that someone had to be Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky!

Shang Qinghua looked at his face and said in astonishment, “Cucumber-bro, what kind of expression is that—don’t tell me that you’re distressed? I always thought you’d be the type to firmly stand your ground. Cucumber-bro. I always thought that you were straight!”

Shen Qingqiu kicked him. “I don’t have time for your nonsense. Tell me, how are we supposed to beat Tianlang-Jun?!”

“Don’t beat him!” Shang Qinghua said, distressed. “Don’t you find him pitiful? Though to tell the truth, I have no idea how to beat him, because I never finished sorting out the details in the outline.”

“If we don’t beat him, you and I will be the pitiful ones. If you have no idea, think now. You were the one who created this world’s logic. Your thoughts themselves *are* the outline!”

He hadn’t finished speaking when Luo Binghe’s voice drifted over. “Shizun, are you done? If you’re about finished, it’s time to leave.”

It hadn’t even been five minutes. Shen Qingqiu quickly turned around. “Leave?”

“Both Sect Leader Yue and I think it’s best for everyone to send ten people to extract the sword. Will Shizun go? If Shizun goes, I’ll go.”

“I can,” said Shen Qingqiu. After a pause, he pointed to Shang Qinghua. “And bring him.”

Shang Qinghua’s face paled in shock as he pleaded with his eyes, *Cucumber-bro, spare me!*

But Shen Qingqiu had already sauntered off.

Liu Qingge and Bai Zhan Peak were responsible for guarding the ice. Shen Qingqiu passed by him, then suddenly doubled back and said, only partly insincere, “If he asks his disciples to kill a thousand, then Shidi must be a role model and kill ten thousand himself.”

Liu Qingge humphed. “I’ll kill all who dare come.”

“Not concerned this time?”

Liu Qingge thought for a bit, then reluctantly said, “Zhangmen-shixiong will be there.”

Luo Binghe tugged on a corner of Shen Qingqiu’s clothes. “Shizun, let me fly with you.”

Shen Qingqiu looked down at his waist. “Don’t you have a sword?”

Now that he was only dealing with Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe immediately dropped his Badass Darkened Demon Lord facade. He said bashfully, “Lately I’ve used too much demonic qi and not enough spiritual energy, so I’ve kind of forgotten how.”

The remaining ten or so people all looked toward them. Shen Qingqiu didn’t want to drag this out. “Get on!” he said recklessly.

Their swords soared high into the sky, and the moment they entered Mai Gu Ridge, they descended. So, Luo Binghe didn’t get that much time to feel him up.

They landed in a patch of jagged rubble. White rocks were densely packed into a forest, withered bones sprouting in the gaps. Looking up, eerie trees rose into the sky, pitch-black in color, intertwined and interlocked. An unknown monster’s cackles mingled with the cawing of crows, the sound reverberating over the ridge.

Before they could find Xin Mo, they’d probably have to search the ridge for a while.

“Mai Gu Ridge has many demonic creatures,” Shen Qingqiu reminded everyone, “so it would be best not to touch anything that looks alive.”

As a demon, and also because he needed to express how sincere he was about cooperating, Luo Binghe naturally situated himself at the forefront, and Shen Qingqiu walked with him, side by side. As the two of them walked and walked, Luo Binghe reached toward Shen Qingqiu and sneakily held his hand.

Wu Wang let out a loud cough, Wu Chen chanted an “Amitabha,” and Yue Qingyuan’s gaze serenely shifted to them.

Shen Qingqiu’s breathing faltered, his forehead, cheeks, neck, and ears flaming in unison. For some reason he felt embarrassed and flustered, and he slowly drew his hand back.

The moment Luo Binghe’s hand went empty, his eyes immediately transformed into a snow-cloaked wasteland. He quickly laughed and said in a hushed voice, “What are you afraid of? They need my assistance, so they won’t say anything.”

Shen Qingqiu said quietly, “That’s not the problem.”

Luo Binghe didn’t relent. “Then what is the problem?”

Shen Qingqiu held up his fan. “Let’s solve the problem before us first, then we can talk later.”

Luo Binghe slowly backed off, then smiled. “All right,” he said lightly. “After all, we’ll have the time to talk later.”

Everyone in their group could sense that countless creatures lurked all around them, ready to pounce, hiding in the densely clustered foliage and waist-high grass, as well as between the gaps in the stark-white heaps of rubble. Jewel-green eyes and hissing breaths rose and fell like tiny ripples.

At this time, the advantage of having Luo Binghe as a vanguard became fully apparent. Whichever direction he walked toward, the ill winds immediately ceased, becoming as silent as the grave. The creatures waiting in ambush either played dead en masse or fled in a panic, rustling as they went.

To put it plainly, it was like they were avoiding the plague…

With that kind of divine assistance, they reached their goal in far less time than they'd anticipated.

If within some swirling white fog, a location that spewed black qi straight up into the sky suddenly appeared—look, anyone who wasn't blind would definitely find it strange.

The mountain cave's entrance was covered in a dense cloak of green leaves, gloomy and forbidding. When standing by the entrance, there was a sense of chill. Everyone stopped in their tracks, hesitant.

Their original expectation had been that, before reaching this place, they would need to kill eight hundred enemy generals, slaughter another thousand demonic creatures, and cut their way through all kinds of poisonous insects and alien plants. Only then would they painfully arrive at the final level.

Even if it were to be less eventful, surely their clothes needed some blood on them to be worthy of a boss fight?!

"I'm afraid we cannot act recklessly," said a sect leader.

"We should first investigate and ascertain the situation," another agreed.

"But of course," said Luo Binghe.

He'd just finished speaking when Mobei-Jun sent Shang Qinghua flying forward with a kick. And he really did go flying…flying…flying…

Under Shen Qingqiu's shocked gaze, Shang Qinghua tumbled and skidded as he went flying into the hole, to "investigate and ascertain the situation."

After a long, dead silence, a terrified scream suddenly exploded from within the cave. "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

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Chapter 21:
Always Together

WITH LIGHTNING SPEED, Shen Qingqiu grabbed a handful of leaves from a vine. He'd just charged into the cave with the rest when he heard a voice.

"So we meet again, Peak Lord Shen."

At the back of the cave, Xin Mo had been stabbed into a crack within the rocks. That black qi and purple miasma they'd seen was pouring from its blade. Tianlang-Jun sat atop a green stone, and not too far in front of it stood Shang Qinghua.

Sunlight from outside spilled into the cave, illuminating part of Tianlang-Jun's body. Right away, someone gasped, drawing in a mouthful of cold air.

Shen Qingqiu finally understood why Shang Qinghua had screamed so terribly seconds ago. Though the smile on Tianlang-Jun's face was as elegant as ever, the right half of his face was near entirely the dark purple of necrosis, making his smile tremendously unnerving. His left sleeve hung limp, completely empty. It seemed the arm that had kept falling off could no longer be reattached.

This dilapidated, near-decimated appearance was far from the final boss Shen Qingqiu had envisioned.

He couldn't help but pay attention to Luo Binghe. But on that face there was only a tranquility that seemed almost wooden, and Shen Qingqiu couldn't tell what it meant.

Tianlang-Jun tilted his head. "Less people than I would have thought. I expected it to be like that time on Bai Lu Mountain, with hundreds of masters all coming at me together."

Wu Wang humphed. "Look at that ghastly appearance of yours. Not to mention, you're without even a single underling. Who would need that many people?"

"I indeed have not a single underling, but I do have a nephew."

The words had barely left Tianlang-Jun's mouth when a green shadow flashed through the cave. Zhuzhi-Lang silently placed himself in front of Tianlang-Jun, shielding him.

For some reason, this master and servant both gave off an air of wretchedness. Being unsuited to demonic energy, Tianlang-Jun's Dew Mushroom body had deteriorated to the point of falling apart. That was understandable. However, Zhuzhi-Lang's eyes too had yellowed, and his neck, cheeks, forehead, arms—just about any part of him that was exposed—now crawled with scales. The result was sinister and frightening, as well as deeply reminiscent of his half-man, half-snake form back in the cave of Bai Lu Forest.

"Peak Lord Shen," he rasped.

"Yes, it's me," said Shen Qingqiu. "How did you end up like this?"

"And what connections do you have with this person this time, Shidi?" Yue Qingyuan asked, composed as ever.

Deep connections. The situation had only progressed to its current state with the heavy involvement of said person. Shen Qingqiu wanted to say something when Tianlang-Jun raised his chin, squinting at Yue Qingyuan.

"I remember you." After thinking for a bit, he said with conviction, "Back then, the Huan Hua Palace's old geezer wanted you to help him with the ambush, but you ignored him. So you're the current sect leader of Cang Qiong Mountain? Not bad."

"Your distinguished self's memory is also quite good."

Tianlang-Jun smiled and smiled, then gave a sigh. "If you were also trapped in a pitch-back darkness for over ten years, unable to glimpse the sky or sun, with nothing to pass the days but for reminiscing over past affairs, your memory would be quite good as well."

This time, no one answered him. Yue Qingyuan gripped Xuan Su, then struck at Tianlang-Jun with the sheathed sword.

Tianlang-Jun barely managed to evade. With a rumbling roar, half of the cave wall behind him collapsed right then and there, opening up a large hole. Outside there was nothing but sky, while swirling sand and loose rocks plummeted into the depths below. Cold air streamed into the cave as fine snowflakes drifted in a slow dance, dazzling the eyes. From the frozen river three hundred meters below, one could faintly hear wave after wave of beastly howls and the sounds of slaughter. The first wave of southern border demons had already landed.

“Let me guess: Bai Zhan Peak is again fighting as the vanguard. Am I correct?” Tianlang-Jun asked.

The dozens of people on the scene dispersed, then rushed him from various angles. At the front of the assault, Wu Wang swung his staff with fierce vigor, his movements vicious. Though Xuan Su slowly forced Zhuzhi-Lang back, he still dutifully drew the brunt of the attacks. Tianlang-Jun continued to sit upon his stone, completely at ease.

“I remember that you also waited until the last moment to draw your sword that day,” he said to Yue Qingyuan. “Doing the same now?”

Yue Qingyuan didn’t answer. He was about to land a palm strike on Zhuzhi-Lang when another sect leader stole in front of him and attacked first. Zhuzhi-Lang neither avoided nor retreated, taking the blow head-on. But it was that sect leader who screamed instead.

Shen Qingqiu’s pupils contracted. “Don’t touch him!” he yelled. “His entire body is poisonous!”

In the chaos of battle, several people were poisoned, while several others were sent flying out of the cave by the explosive surges of demonic qi and spiritual energy. They careened out into the high altitudes, plummeting downward before they managed to flip themselves back onto their swords, thereby regaining their footing.

Shang Qinghua stealthily snuck toward Shen Qingqiu’s location. Zhuzhi-Lang was overwhelmed by the excitement of battle, so when he glimpsed a suspicious figure creeping away, he flung two green snakes at them without thinking. Shen Qingqiu saw all this clearly. He flipped his hand over, ready to send out a leaf to save “Great Master” Airplane’s life—when the two snakes were suddenly pierced in midair by a razor-sharp shard of ice.

Mobei-Jun appeared within the circle of battle like a wraith. He picked up Shang Qinghua, tossing him in Shen Qingqiu's direction like one would a little chick, then pummeled Zhuzhi-Lang with his fists.

In the ensuing ten seconds, Shen Qingqiu witnessed what a real "beatdown" looked like…

With Zhuzhi-Lang under Mobei-Jun's crazed and relentless assault, the attacks besieging Tianlang-Jun grew suddenly fiercer.

Though Tianlang-Jun was missing an arm and was only one against many, his poise wasn't at all diminished. "Hah, why must you be like this again? Ganging up on one person—don't you think that victory won by unequal advantage is immoral?"

A sect leader attacked him. "Against a malicious and demonic monster like you, who wishes to see the world burn, what morals are there to speak of?!"

In the next moment, that sect leader's skull split open like a garlic clove, rent into multiple chunks.

Tianlang-Jun pulled his hand back and smiled. "Honestly, in the beginning I had no malice, nor did I find fun in the idea of the world burning. I only occasionally crossed the border, coming here to sing songs or read books—it was quite nice. However, since I've already been in residence beneath Bai Lu Mountain for so many years, if I don't follow through on something along the lines of your thoughts, I'd truly find my circumstances a bit too unjustified."

Yue Qingyuan flicked his finger. Xuan Su sprang three inches from its sheath, its spiritual energy seething.

The bones of Tianlang-Jun's body cracked and popped, almost like his joints had been dislocated. He made a sound of surprise. "As expected of a sect leader. Not bad. Your master was quite mediocre but had quite the eye for disciples and successors."

Then Tianlang-Jun reached out and grabbed Xuan Su's blade directly, as if he couldn't feel a thing. "But why not draw it all the way?" he said with a smile. "You can't do anything to me with only this much."

Yue Qingyuan’s gaze hardened, and Xuan Su jumped another half-inch from its sheath.

“He can’t do anything to you,” Luo Binghe said, sudden and cold. “But what about me?”

Tianlang-Jun’s smile hadn’t faded when, suddenly, a stream of powerful demonic qi slammed into him like a blow from an axe.

His remaining arm was blasted off from his body, then whipped outside the cave by a gust of wind, hurtling down and away from Mai Gu Ridge.

Luo Binghe was finally taking action!

In this Father vs. Son rematch, it was finally Tianlang-Jun’s turn to be powerless to fight back. Luo Binghe’s eyes were blindingly crimson, his face taut, and his attacks were ruthless, without the slightest hint of mercy. With both of Tianlang-Jun’s arms severed, he even began to look like he had been overwhelmed and backed into a corner.

Meanwhile, after much difficulty, Zhuzhi-Lang had managed to break free from Mobei-Jun. His face was a mess of blood and gore, but when he saw his master in trouble, he rushed straight over, like all the bloodlust had gone to his head. Right at that moment, Tianlang-Jun’s demonic qi swept over Wu Wang, sending him flying as blood sprayed from his mouth, and Master Wu Chen ran to catch him. Zhuzhi-Lang was about to slam into him when Shen Qingqiu saw this unfortunate turn and swept in front of Wu Chen, shielding him.

As soon as Zhuzhi-Lang saw Shen Qingqiu, a shred of clarity flashed through those bright yellow eyes, and he abruptly braked, disrupting his balance as he staggered and nearly fell. Just as he was about to detour around Shen Qingqiu to assist Tianlang-Jun, a beam of white light shot swiftly toward them. Zhuzhi-Lang’s back slammed heavily into the cave wall—he’d been impaled through the chest against the rocks.

The long, slender blade buried in his chest belonged to Zheng Yang.

Shen Qingqiu turned his head to see Luo Binghe slowly withdraw his hand. Tianlang-Jun serenely stood about six meters behind him.

After a short while, he gracefully fell to the ground.

Silence.

It was over?

That easily?

Part of Shen Qingqiu couldn’t believe it. He’d barely done anything, and it was over? He patted Shang Qinghua’s shoulder. “Didn’t you say that Tianlang-Jun would be hard?”

Shang Qinghua was still in a state of shock. “He *is* hard.”

“Is this victory logical?”

“No matter how hard the boss is, he shouldn’t think about flaunting his power in front of the protagonist. Isn’t that the widely accepted logic?”

The two of them looked around. They’d come with dozens of people with full HP bars, and now barely two or three were still standing. Shen Qingqiu then looked at the two individuals who he’d previously regarded as the super-hard final boss team. One was impaled against the wall and soaked in fresh blood, while the other lay flat on the ground. Together they made a great match for descriptions like “trampled and tattered doll” and “a puppet with its strings cut.”

He felt not the slightest bit of the exhilaration one usually got from beating a final boss. The more he looked, the more he felt that it was basically the same as bullying the sick and elderly, or shamelessly ganging up on victims using strength in numbers…and they’d indeed ganged up on these two.

But who could have known that this would be the result? The boss’s strength was way too far below what he’d imagined!

Luo Binghe turned, expression tranquil and without a drop of blood on him. “Shall we kill him?”

He was referring to Tianlang-Jun. When Zhuzhi-Lang heard this, he grabbed Zheng Yang’s blade, struggling to pull it out. A great deal of the scales on his neck had been scraped off in the battle. As he exerted himself now, blood flowed forth from his body in streams.

Ever since Shen Qingqiu had learned of Gongyi Xiao’s death at Zhuzhi-Lang’s hands, a knot had existed in his heart. But this image was too unbearable—it was difficult not to feel sympathy. Though Shen Qingqiu had been screwed over countless times by his bizarre methods of repayment, Zhuzhi-Lang had never shown him any malice.

Shen Qingqiu sighed. "Look at the state you're in. Why let yourself suffer so?"

Zhuzhi-Lang coughed up a mouthful of foamy blood and rasped, "The state I'm in?" He smiled bitterly. "What if I said that my appearance on Bai Lu Mountain was my actual true form? What would you think then, Immortal Master Shen?"

It was like a bolt of lightning had struck Shen Qingqiu's forehead. What, so the slithering snake-man from Bai Lu Forest…that was Zhuzhi-Lang's original form?!

Zhuzhi-Lang gasped for breath. "My bloodline is lowly, all because my father was a simpleminded giant snake. I had this half-man, half-snake appearance from the moment my mother gave birth to me. Until I was fifteen, I was always hated and discarded, or insulted and driven away. If not for my lord, who helped me take on a man's form, even guided and supported me, I would have spent my entire life as a monster that could only wriggle on the ground."

He gritted his teeth. "My lord gave me my first chance to become a person and Immortal Shen gave me my second. Perhaps to both of you, it was only a small thing, no more effort than lifting a finger, but to me, these were favors I must repay even if they cost me thousands of lives… And Immortal Master Shen asked me why I 'let myself suffer'? Tell me, how have I suffered?"

Tianlang-Jun suddenly sighed. "Foolish child, why say so much to him?"

Though he was on the ground, his pose was still as graceful as ever. If you could remove the half of his face that had deteriorated from demonic qi, he would have looked even more elegant.

"People always believe that those of a different race have different hearts as well," he said leisurely as he stared upward. "Even the person dearest to you can deceive you in the blink of an eye. Besides, it was only ever your one-sided desire to repay him. No matter what you say, he won't understand you. He'll only find it troublesome and refuse to comprehend. So why say so much?"

In a moment, everyone at the scene fell silent.

Once a good and guileless young man, Tianlang-Jun had joyfully fallen in love, yet it had been nothing more than a sham. Then for countless days and nights, he'd been sealed beneath a high mountain where there was neither sun nor sky. Who had the right to stop him from resenting them? Who had the right to make him "let it go" and "look on the bright side"?

Yet Master Wu Chen said, "If your distinguished self really possessed no malicious designs back then, then we are at fault for listening to slander. If so, this calamity today was something we could neither run from nor avoid. Those who sow seeds of evil will reap the rewards, for all will eventually come around." He brought his palms together. "But even if it meant ingesting poison, Benefactor Su wanted to see you, so how can you condemn her for deceiving you?"

Tianlang-Jun startled a little, then raised his head.

Shen Qingqiu was also stunned. He knew that Master Wu Chen would never lie, yet the version of the story he told next was completely different from what the others had known to be true.

"Back at Zhao Hua Monastery," said Master Wu Chen, "because this one didn't wish to subject Benefactor Su to criticism when she had already passed, and because this one promised to keep it secret, he was unable to speak the truth. The Old Palace Master brought Benefactor Su back to Huan Hua Palace by force. She absolutely refused to obey orders, refused to trick you into going to the site of the ambush, where several dozen arrays had been set in advance. The Old Palace Master only discovered she was pregnant when subjecting her to torture within the Water Prison. Forcibly aborting the fetus would have endangered her life, and on top of that, Benefactor Su was resisting with all her might. So, the Old Palace Master gave her a bowl of poison, that poison fatal to the demon race. He told her that as long as she was willing to drink it, he'd let her out to see you.

"Benefactor Su drank what the Old Palace Master gave her, then left the palace alone. But she didn't realize that change takes but an instant—that the situation was already other than what she thought. The Old Palace

Master had switched the site of the attack to Bai Lu Mountain, where the two of you had met in the past.”

Tianlang-Jun was completely stunned. His body was mangled, and blood still stained the corner of his mouth. Despite this, he struggled to raise his head, like he wanted to hear more clearly. There was an indescribable pitifulness to him.

“This one met Benefactor Su on the road to Bai Lu Mountain. At that time, it hadn’t been long since she’d drunk the poison. She was covered in blood, and it dripped with every step she took. This one listened to the few lines she gasped out and guessed the general situation. Unable to bear deceiving her, he told her that several days before, Tianlang-Jun had already been sealed for all eternity. Only then did she realize that her master had told her a monstrous lie. Not only the location, but even the time had been false. All for the sake of making her drink that poison!

“In accordance with her pleas, this one helped her avoid the Huan Hua Palace disciples who’d come to capture her, then escorted her to the Luo River’s upper reaches. After that, he never saw any trace of her again.

“Tianlang-Jun, Benefactor Su indeed might not have been a wholly good person. Originally, she stood high as the next Huan Hua Palace Master, with great expectations upon her. In the beginning, her decision to approach you might not have been made with good intentions. But afterward, which was it? Did you maliciously bewitch her, did she set you up and deceive you, or were both of you simply unable to help your feelings?

“This one is an outsider, so he can know nothing of your heart. But what he does know and what he did see was Benefactor Su refusing to listen to the orders of the master who’d raised her for over a decade. Even when tormented in the Water Prison, she refused to say anything, refused to trick or harm you. If not as a last resort, what mother in this world would drink that kind of poison?

“It wasn’t that she didn’t care about you, but that she was without alternative. Yet the world is pitiless, and so you passed each other by…”

Tianlang-Jun’s lips seemed to tremble slightly. A long moment passed. Then he said, “Is that so?” Right after those three words, he asked again, “Truly?”

“This one swears upon his life that his words contain not a single falsehood,” said Master Wu Chen.

Tianlang-Jun turned his head to look at Shen Qingqiu and Yue Qingyuan. As if seeking confirmation, he asked, “Truly?”

He didn’t even care whether someone was in the know; he was just asking anyone he could. Unable to say anything, Yue Qingyuan silently lowered his head. It was unclear what he thought. Shen Qingqiu deliberated over it further, then finally gave a slow nod.

Perhaps the Old Palace Master originally had no intention of vilifying and harming Tianlang-Jun, but as he watched his disciple grow closer and closer to him, he must have regretted sending Su Xiyan to approach the demon. He’d allowed her to leave his control and fall in mutual love with Tianlang-Jun, even conceiving Luo Binghe. So the Old Palace Master had made up his mind. He distorted the truth and cherry-picked the details. His orchestrations transformed Tianlang-Jun into a matchless fiend who wanted to overturn the Three Realms.

And so, he’d brought ruin to so many lives and so many years.

The smattering of snowflakes on Tianlang-Jun’s eyelashes trembled with their movement. Then, like all his strength had suddenly left him, he lay down once more. He sighed. “All right. In any case, finally something less terrible unfolds.”

Shen Qingqiu turned his head to look at Luo Binghe. He’d listened from beginning to end, but it was like he’d heard nothing at all, like none of this concerned him—he even let out a light laugh.

With this truth out in the open, the knot within Tianlang-Jun’s heart had naturally come undone. But to Luo Binghe, the cruelty of the situation hadn’t lessened in the least. Regardless of whether it was because his parents hated him, or because they had given up on him, in the end, he had been thrown away.

Black smoke and purple miasma continued to spew from Xin Mo without pause, and the sounds of slaughter from below grew clearer and clearer. Mai Gu Ridge’s descent was still ongoing. Just how much distance remained before they reached the Luo River’s frozen surface?

Yue Qingyuan took several steps toward where Xin Mo was embedded in the wall.

"The situation has thus far unraveled," Shen Qingqiu said. "Bring an end to this, Tianlang-Jun."

If Tianlang-Jun stopped now, it wouldn't be too late. But if he continued to supply Xin Mo with demonic qi, then their only option to prevent the merge would be to kill him. And now that all was said and done, Shen Qingqiu didn't particularly wish for Tianlang-Jun to actually die. After all, to end up in this state due to falling in love was really just unfortunate. To demand his life on top of that…

What kind of boss is this pitiful?!

Yet Tianlang-Jun suddenly let out a stifled laugh, the sound echoing through the cave. "Look, Peak Lord Shen," he said, tilting his head like he found something incredibly funny. "As I am, I can't even maintain Zhuzhi-Lang's human form anymore."

At that moment, Shen Qingqiu didn't yet realize the meaning within Tianlang-Jun's words, he only felt something lurch within his heart.

"Having fought with all of you for so long, the toll on this body of mine was no small matter," said Tianlang-Jun, slow and measured. "Who do you think has been sustaining Xin Mo and supplying it with demonic qi all this time?"

His words were neither fast nor slow, but as they entered Shen Qingqiu's ears, each one seemed to plunge him into icy water, and his neck slowly stiffened.

"You should be telling someone to bring an end to this, yes. Only, that person isn't me."

Tianlang-Jun's arms were broken beyond repair, and Zhuzhi-Lang was impaled against the stone wall. Master Wu Chen was supporting Wu Wang, whose head bled profusely. Mobei-Jun had Shang Qinghua dangling in his hold, and Yue Qingyuan stood beside Shen Qingqiu.

Only Luo Binghe stood directly opposite Xin Mo's position, his head lowered as he leisurely adjusted his sleeves.

"Luo Binghe, come here," Shen Qingqiu said solemnly.

Luo Binghe shook his head once. Only once, but very resolutely.

"You lied to me again," Shen Qingqiu said, dismayed.

Luo Binghe's movements paused, and he asked, "Shizun, I said I would help you against Tianlang-Jun. I can kill him for you right now and right away, so how can you say I lied to you?"

Tianlang-Jun smiled. "Letting the enemy go to cover for one's own work—that was quite a good move. But unfortunately, I'm not very useful, so in the end he had to take action himself."

Upon hearing the words, "letting the enemy go to cover for one's own work," Shen Qingqiu's heart became increasingly uneasy.

Did Luo Binghe purposely give Xin Mo to Tianlang-Jun?

After all, Tianlang-Jun's Dew Mushroom body had deteriorated faster with Xin Mo in his possession. So even if the sword was given to him, it couldn't have posed much of a threat to Luo Binghe.

Perhaps Shen Qingqiu was too disoriented and allowed his thoughts to show on his face, because Luo Binghe said sorrowfully, "Shizun, what are you thinking now? He did steal Xin Mo, it's just that Xin Mo still recognizes me as its master. You said before that you would rather trust me and accept the consequences than not assume you can't trust me at all. Why do you again not trust me?"

"I've trusted you many times," Shen Qingqiu said slowly. "Up until just now, I still trusted you."

"Is that so?" said Luo Binghe. His face twisted into a smile. "But I don't dare trust Shizun anymore."

That smile was incredibly uncanny. Shen Qingqiu sensed something was wrong, so he softened his expression and tone. "What's gotten into you this time?"

The moment he softened, Luo Binghe suddenly stopped smiling. His appearance was full of sorrow and despair. "Shizun, I've said this before. The times you're with them are really when you're happiest."

To begin with, Shen Qingqiu had yet to figure out who "them" referred to.

Luo Binghe slowly paced back and forth before the stone wall where Xin Mo was embedded. He laughed in self-mockery, “Every time I asked Shizun to leave with me, you never agreed, not even once. When you did come, it was because I demanded it by force, not because you were willing. But when they ask you to stay, you never hesitate.”

He looked at Shen Qingqiu. “Shizun, you don’t smile often. I love seeing you smile. But whenever I recall that you only smile like that when you’re with them, it…” He said, very quietly, “It hurts me very, very much.”

Shen Qingqiu finally understood. “Them” referred to Cang Qiong Mountain.

That day in the Bamboo House, Liu Qingge had suddenly opened the windows to investigate. So it really had been because he’d sensed the hint of murderous intent Luo Binghe had let leak while loitering outside, as well as his aura of rage and despair.

Instead of leaving, he’d stayed to hear the laughter within the Bamboo House, as well as that single “mm” of agreement, and he’d engraved all of it within his heart.

“That’s why you’re angry?” said Shen Qingqiu.

“Angry?” Luo Binghe darkly spat out two words: “I hate!”

Then, “I hate myself!”

His pace quickened with his irritation, his hands clasped behind his back.

“I hate how I’m useless. I hate how I can never keep anyone, how no one…has ever chosen me.”

Everyone in the cave was unable to make any sudden moves. Luo Binghe was currently maintaining Xin Mo’s energy supply, and nobody wanted him to suddenly lash out.

“By doing this, you mean to force him to choose between the two?” Zhuzhi-Lang asked.

Luo Binghe paused and shook his head. “Choose between the two? No. That’s not it. I know that if he chooses, Shizun definitely won’t pick me. So, it’s fine if he has no choice to make.” A slight flush infused his stark-white face, derived from a kind of strange excitement. “This time, I’ve learned my lesson. If Cang Qiong Mountain ceases to exist, everything will be fine, right? That way, Shizun will only have me.”

Master Wu Chen chanted sutras and pressed his palms together, saying, “Amitabha.” Then he said, “Benefactor Luo, you’re possessed.”

Luo Binghe burst into loud, unrestrained laughter.

“If you leave him no choice, then of course you can’t be abandoned,” Master Wu Chen continued. “But how will you deal with Peak Lord Shen’s actions and behavior toward you afterward?”

“Shizun, if Qing Jing Peak is gone, I can build you another,” Luo Binghe said gently. “It’s fine if you resent me, it’s fine if you hate me. I won’t make any great demands. If you’re unsatisfied, you can hit me, try to kill me. After all, I won’t die. As long… As long you don’t leave me.” He spoke so earnestly. “Truly, I only have this one wish.”

Luo Binghe’s smile was twisted, his pupils dilated, the bloodred irises rimming them periodically expanding and contracting. Xin Mo overflowed with purple light. It was impossible to tell if he was controlling the sword or if the sword was controlling him.

As Shen Qingqiu observed Luo Binghe’s disoriented, qi-deviated appearance, a bitter taste filled his mouth, and he couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“Other than Cang Qiong Mountain, this world has thousands of things that Immortal Master Shen values,” said Zhuzhi-Lang. “Are you going to destroy all those as well?”

“Yes?” said Luo Binghe, smiling. “Why not!” He tilted his head, then suddenly exploded with rage. “Shut him up!”

Mobei-Jun heard these words, thought for a moment, and threw a punch at Zhuzhi-Lang’s face.

Tianlang-Jun studied Luo Binghe, and pity flashed through his gaze. “Xin Mo has already invaded his mind,” he sighed. “He’s gone mad.”

This was the one and only time since his first meeting with Luo Binghe that he looked something like a father.

But Luo Binghe didn’t notice at all, just nodded and smiled. “Yes. I’ve gone mad.”

Upon hearing him admit to his lunacy, Shen Qingqiu’s heart spasmed with a dull pain. “Binghe, get away from that sword first,” he said quietly. “The farther the better.”

As he gently coaxed him, he secretly placed a hand on Xiu Ya’s hilt, the action concealed by his wide sleeve.

Luo Binghe laughed. “It’s no use. Shizun, you don’t need to do this. The nicer you are to me, the more afraid I become.”

As he spoke, his right hand made a slight upward gesture. In an instant, Xin Mo’s purple qi overflowed.

Zhuzhi-Lang spat out a mouthful of congested blood. The punch a moment ago had only shut him up for a little while. He calmly said, “Pitiful.”

“Pitiful?” Luo Binghe muttered. “That’s right, I’m pitiful. It’d be fine if it’s out of pity too. Will Shizun stay by my side just this once?” Tears rolled down Luo Binghe’s cheeks, and his pupils reddened as he gritted his teeth. “Shizun, you’ve let go of me again and again. Always, always, anyone, anything! They all become a reason to abandon me, until sometimes you don’t even need a reason! It’s always like this!”

Suddenly, Shang Qinghua fell to the ground with a thud. Shen Qingqiu also unconsciously grabbed on to the stone wall. The entire ground started to shake violently. Mai Gu Ridge’s descent had sped up.

“He’s gone mad, Shidi,” Yue Qingyuan said mildly. “How will you deal with this?”

Luo Binghe sneered and backed up two steps, then abruptly grabbed Xin Mo’s hilt. The tremors became stronger and stronger. Looking out through the hole in the cave, one could see innumerable mountain peaks of different heights jutting through the rolling clouds. Shen Qingqiu was about to pull out Xiu Ya when suddenly a blinding white light shone from beside him. Yue Qingyuan had drawn his sword first. The sword’s howl ripped through the drifting snow and dark purple qi.

Xuan Su had been unsheathed!

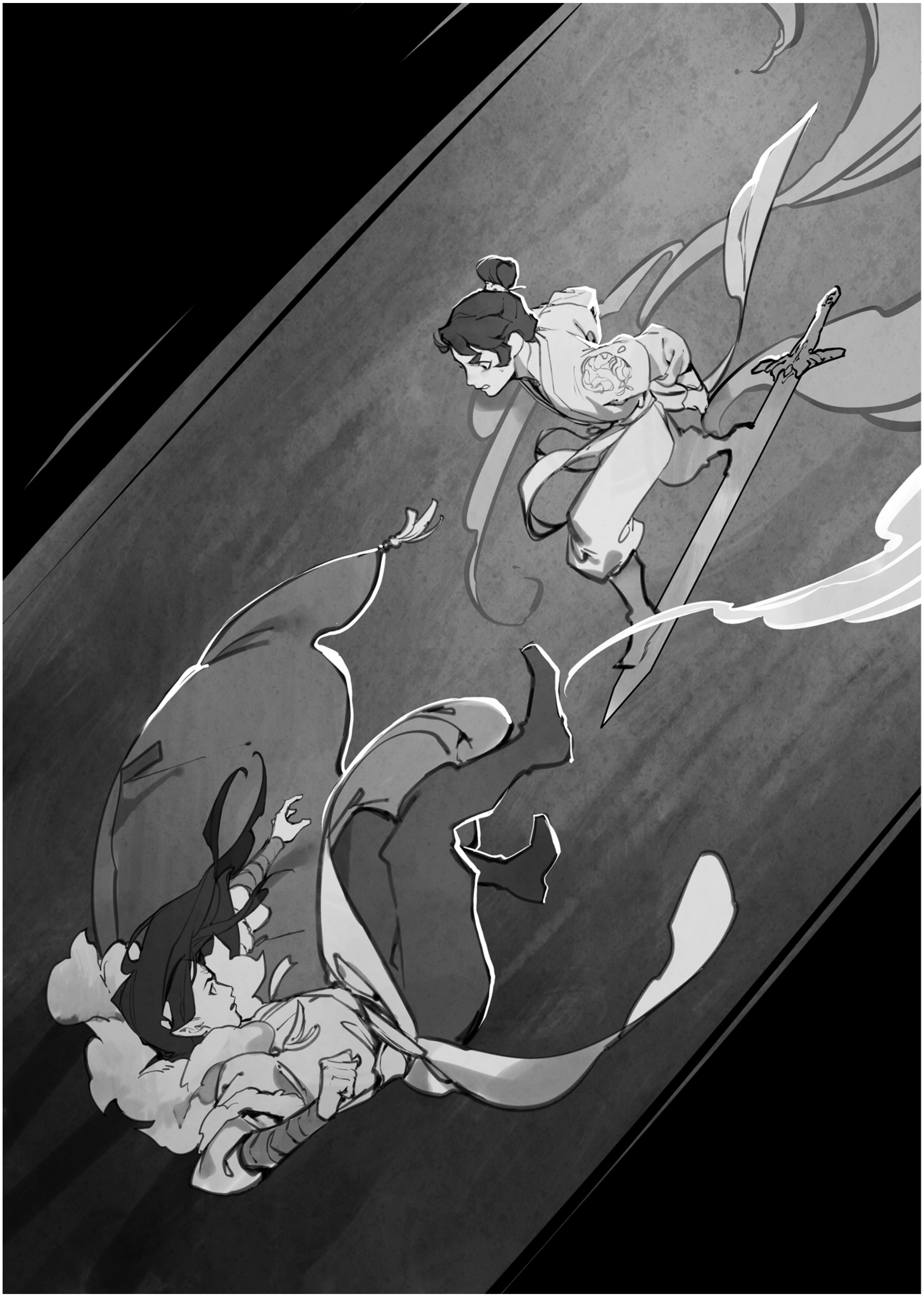
Mobei-Jun saw Yue Qingyuan point the sword at Luo Binghe and stepped up to fight. Xuan Su’s spiritual energy surged, and Mobei-Jun was blown away before they even made contact.

Mobei-Jun looked like he’d never expected that a day would come where someone would send him flying. In a flash, he’d been thrown off Mai Gu Ridge, that expression still glued to his face.

Shang Qinghua seemed frightened out of his wits. He snatched up a sword and rushed forward, but Shen Qingqiu quickly grabbed him. “What are you doing?!”

Shang Qinghua roared, “Fuck! He can’t fly!”

With that, he leapt down.



Shen Qingqiu braved the gales and flurries of snow to peer down through the rupture. He just managed to see Shang Qinghua riding his sword and catching Mobei-Jun, still three hundred meters above the ice.

After confirming he wouldn't fall to his death, Shen Qingqiu didn't even give himself the time to sigh in relief and quickly turned back around. Luo Binghe and Yue Qingyuan were already dueling.

As expected, Luo Binghe's power was terrifying, but Shen Qingqiu hadn't expected a fully unleashed Xuan Su to be so powerful, capable of evenly matching a berserk Luo Binghe. Shen Qingqiu felt the fluctuating spiritual energy and demonic qi reverberate as they pressed on his eardrums and throat. He could tell that this cavern would soon collapse and rushed to the stone wall. He grabbed Xin Mo barehanded and, with a forceful heave, yanked it out.

Although he'd extracted the blade, Mai Gu Ridge's descent didn't slow. Luo Binghe saw the situation and moved to seize the sword. Yue Qingyuan didn't give him the chance. Using the tip of Xuan Su's blade, he carved a dazzling trail visible to the naked eye, and an enormous barrier marked with complicated incantations and seals formed an invisible cage, trapping Luo Binghe within.

Seeing that Shen Qingqiu had already acquired Xin Mo, Yue Qingyuan said sternly, "Go!"

How could he go in this sort of situation? Shen Qingqiu immediately shook his head and was about to toss Xin Mo to Yue Qingyuan when he felt something beneath him falter.

It wasn't his legs that had given out, it was the ground. The cave had finally collapsed.

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On Mai Gu Ridge's second level, Shen Qingqiu dug Yue Qingyuan out from beneath a pile of rubble. "Sect Leader? Shixiong? Zhangmen-shixiong!"

Yue Qingyuan’s complexion was slightly pale, and blood trickled from his lips. He swallowed once, as if forcing down a mouthful of warm blood. He opened his eyes and glanced at Shen Qingqiu. “Where are the others?”

The internal structure of Mai Gu Ridge was now like a disordered honeycomb, with cave after cave, all connected. Shen Qingqiu gave his surroundings a once over. “I don’t see Master Wu Chen or Tianlang-Jun. They might be buried here, or they might have tumbled with the piles of rubble down into the other caves.” He turned his head back. “Shixiong, when did you get injured?”

Yue Qingyuan didn’t answer the question. “Do you have Xin Mo?”

Shen Qingqiu showed him the sword. “Here. Mai Gu Ridge is still falling, but the merge has probably yet to finish. Shixiong, take the sword. Head down and destroy it.”

With Shen Qingqiu supporting him, Yue Qingyuan slowly stood. “And you?”

Of course, Shen Qingqiu would head back to look for Luo Binghe. But he avoided the question. “Shixiong, this injury of yours isn’t normal. Exactly what happened?”

Yue Qingyuan provided an irrelevant answer. “Originally, I didn’t want to, but…in the end, I’m an impulsive person.”

Shen Qingqiu thought those words strange, but he didn’t have the mind to think about them carefully and continued to walk while supporting him. “Shixiong, can you still walk? You head down first. Destroy the sword and have Mu-shidi heal you. Leave Luo Binghe to me.”

As Shen Qingqiu was supporting him, Yue Qingyuan could stand with some difficulty, all while dripping fresh blood onto the ground. Thinking he was fine, Shen Qingqiu let go, but once he did, Yue Qingyuan didn’t remain standing for long before he unexpectedly collapsed again.

Shen Qingqiu blanched with shock, then hurried to help him up again. “Zhangmen-shixiong? Zhangmen-shixiong?” After a brief examination, even with his superficial medical knowledge, he could tell that Yue Qingyuan’s current condition was horrible.

Yue Qingyuan's expression was vacant, like he hadn't heard anything Shen Qingqiu said. "However…those times at Jin Lan City and during Luo Binghe's siege of the mountain, I kept calm and took the big picture into account… Thinking back on it, it would have been better…to be impulsive."

At the sight of him so drowsy and about to fall asleep, Shen Qingqiu itched to pinch Yue Qingyuan hard on the spot above his upper lip to wake him up, but he didn't dare overstep. So he could only yell in his ear to stop him from passing out. "Shixiong, wake up! You weren't wrong!"

Yue Qingyuan closed his eyes and shook his head. He drew a breath, then another violent coughing fit befell him, causing Shen Qingqiu to jump in terror. Blood flowed out incessantly with the coughs. With difficulty, he said, "Return…Xuan Su to its sheath for me."

Shen Qingqiu hurriedly dropped down next to him. Xuan Su's blade was still emitting a blinding white light. He returned the sword to its sheath, then held it out to Yue Qingyuan.

At this, Yue Qingyuan's complexion finally improved somewhat, and the most arduous of his breaths eased. He stared at the hand Shen Qingqiu had used to handle Xuan Su in a daze, then instead of taking it, said, "If I perish here, you… must bring Xuan Su back to Wan Jian Peak for me."

Shen Qingqiu was shocked. "What did you say?"

Perish? Yue Qingyuan's injuries were so severe that he was likely to die?!

"Xuan Su is incredibly powerful, but I never draw it against enemies," Yue Qingyuan said. "You must have attempted to guess why."

Shen Qingqiu nodded. Not only had he attempted, many people had.

"Xuan Su is my life," said Yue Qingyuan. "Do you understand what this means?"

Shen Qingqiu absolutely didn't. But he knew that it definitely wasn't just a figure of speech for loving your sword more than your own life. He also knew that what Yue Qingyuan's next words would without a doubt be a secret that he'd never told anyone before.

Sure enough, Yue Qingyuan said, “Every time I draw Xuan Su, it consumes my life force.”

As soon as these words were said, Shen Qingqiu felt like the Xuan Su he held instantly became a thousand times heavier.

No wonder Xuan Su never left its sheath.

No wonder Yue Qingyuan never drew his sword, unless as a last resort.

“Shixiong, you… This was because of a qi deviation?” Shen Qingqiu said, stunned.

By using his life force to channel his spiritual energy, he’d bound his life to his sword. If not due to a terrible accident during cultivation, in which he’d entered a qi deviation, why else would Yue Qingyuan cultivate this kind of unnatural path?!

Yue Qingyuan slowly said, “At age fifteen, I entered Qiong Ding Peak, my heart preoccupied and desperate for success. I failed in my venture to become one with the sword, falling instead into this state—a state contrary to my initial goals, which left me with untold lifelong regrets.”

As he spoke, the vestige of color his coughing had brought to his face suddenly vanished without a trace.

Shen Qingqiu hurried to interrupt him. “Don’t talk anymore. This isn’t the time to speak of this. I’ll take you to Mu-shidi first.”

The two of them walked several painful steps before Yue Qingyuan suddenly said in a low voice, “I’m sorry.”

Shen Qingqiu didn’t understand why he was apologizing. Yue Qingyuan had never wronged him in any way. If anything, it was he who should be sorry, always slacking off and screwing around. He’d even dumped a mountain of troubles on Yue Qingyuan, forcing him to take responsibility and bear the headache of cleaning up his messes.

But Yue Qingyuan’s next words would shake Shen Qingqiu to the core. “I’m truly…sorry.” Even his voice trembled. “Even though I wanted to return as soon as possible, even though I wanted to come get you immediately…I made a mess of things instead. You were right. In the end, I’m an impulsive person…

“After that, Shizun destroyed all the tendons, bones, and meridians in my body, then shut me inside the Lingxi Caves for more than a year. My entirety was broken down, to be rebuilt anew.

“I screamed, I yelled, but it was no use. For an entire year, inside that pitch-black cave, no matter how crazed I became, how hysterical, no one listened closely to what I said, no one let me out…

“I pushed myself as hard as I could, but by the time I returned, Qiu Manor had already been destroyed for some time…”

From deep within Shen Qingqiu’s mind came the sound of something tearing.

In that instant, all of Yue Qingyuan’s past ardent concern, his wordless protectiveness, all kinds of scenes, all manner of details, connected within his mind like a merry-go-round, clear beyond compare.

No wonder no matter how “Shen Qingqiu” dug his own grave, the sect leader never made life difficult for him and instead remained infinitely forgiving, infinitely patient.

No wonder the rescuer Shen Jiu had been waiting for never returned.

Yue Qingyuan, Shen Qingqiu; Yue Qi, Shen Jiu.

So that’s how it was! That’s how it was!

“I really…didn’t mean to not return,” said Yue Qingyuan. “Only, it really is true that the world is pitiless, and so the two of us passed each other by…”

With each line he spoke, the more violently fresh blood surged.

Shen Qingqiu supported him by the arm, pausing twice as long for every step they took. “Don’t talk anymore,” he sighed.

He already knew everything that happened next.

“Just let me finish speaking, this one time,” Yue Qingyuan said resolutely. “As you always say, ‘sorry’ is nothing but an empty word, completely useless. I also never explained myself, but today I must let you hear, not to ask for your forgiveness or sympathy, but because if I don't say it now…it will be too late."

Shen Qingqiu's heart became acrid, his eyes hot.

Too late. It was already too late!

Shen Jiu was no longer here.

Maybe he'd died, or maybe like Shen Yuan, his soul had been transported into another world.

But no matter which, he would never again be able to hear Yue Qingyuan's words, never ever.

The System sent out a series of notifications:

Hidden Character (1) Zhuzhi-Lang: completion rate 100 percent.

Hidden Character (2) Tianlang-Jun: completion rate 100 percent.

Hidden Character (3) Su Xiyan: completion rate 100 percent.

Plot Hole-Filling Target (1) Shen Qingqiu: completion rate 100 percent.

Plot Hole-Filling Target (2) Yue Qingyuan: completion rate 100 percent.

Met basic criteria for character completion. The System's scan found no obvious logical gaps. B-Points per achievement +300; total sum 1,500. Congratulations! By upgrading "Rather a Lot of Things to Roast," you have unlocked the achievement "Readable If Nothing Else Is Available"!

Satisfaction points at 0. In this situation, you can substitute B-Points when paying for drop cost of key items. Do you accept?

The chime of positive notifications formed a cascade, brimming with a joyful atmosphere. Yet Shen Qingqiu had never been more depressed.

He said, "What's the point?"

Exactly what was this System? What was the point of its existence? So he could know exactly how unfortunate these people were? So he could personally witness the most tragic ways the world could screw people over?

Or so he could drive Luo Binghe to insanity?

Everyone said Luo Binghe had gone mad. Even he himself had smiled and admitted it. Xin Mo, which Luo Binghe had finally managed to suppress after a million words of struggle in the original work, had gained the upper hand in this struggle and invaded Luo Binghe’s mind.

This wasn’t a result of one or two events, but a slow accumulation over time, until finally it had completely erupted. Numerous signs had long since made themselves apparent, but Shen Qingqiu had never noticed.

Or perhaps he should say that he’d never realized that Luo Binghe was actually so insecure, to the point of having an inferiority complex.

First, he’d thought Luo Binghe was unbelievably cruel and evil, then he’d thought Luo Binghe was unspeakably strong and bright. Looking back, the symptoms of Xin Mo’s invasion of Luo Binghe’s mind had appeared as early as Zhao Hua Monastery.

When Luo Binghe heard his backstory, he’d received a massive shock. In his moment of greatest panic, he reached out to Shen Qingqiu, pleading for his shizun to leave with him.

But Shen Qingqiu hadn’t taken Luo Binghe’s hand and instead had made Luo Binghe leave alone first. At that time, Luo Binghe’s psyche started to grow incredibly unstable. What he’d needed wasn’t a path of safe retreat, but to be together with Shen Qingqiu. Even if he was trapped in Zhao Hua Monastery and unable to retreat, even if he was surrounded and attacked by everyone present—either outcome was better than leaving alone!

To a Luo Binghe in that state of mind, having to leave alone was as good as being “thrown away”—like he had been when Su Xiyan willingly drank that poison.

It was exactly as Luo Binghe himself had said. He wasn’t forcing Shen Qingqiu to choose between two options because he was completely certain he knew the answer, down to his very bones: that Shen Qingqiu would one day abandon him.

His entire mind had flooded with terror of and anxiety from speculating over something yet to happen. How could he not go completely insane?

Yue Qingyuan's steps became increasingly unsteady, to the point he almost couldn't stand anymore.

Shen Qingqiu had never seen the sect leader appear so weak. Yue Qingyuan had always been stolid and full of strength. Even if he never spoke too much or too little, even if he lacked any aggressiveness and was gentle and affable, he was also extremely dependable and dignified.

Now not only was he having difficulty walking, he even spoke more than usual. He likely really thought he wasn't going to make it.

Shen Qingqiu was almost dragging him along by this point. As he walked, he said, "Zhangmen-shixiong, hold on. You absolutely can't pass out. Everything will be all right in a moment."

Yue Qingyuan smiled bitterly. "All these years, you've never mentioned the past and only ever called me Zhangmen-shixiong. Are you determined to never call me Qi-ge again?"

The bones and veins in Shen Qingqiu's sword hand bulged. Yue Qingyuan wanted to hear Shen Jiu call him "Qi-ge." But he wasn't Shen Jiu.

He dredged up the original flavor's cold and hateful energy, then adamantly refused: "I won't."

He *could not* raise the flag! In dramas and novels, whenever a character achieved their final wish and finished speaking their last words, they immediately kicked the bucket, their desires satisfied.

"I didn't hear anything you just said," Shen Qingqiu went on harshly. "Hold on. Keep going!"

Yue Qingyuan closed his eyes and sighed. "Xiao-Jiu …"

Don't call me that.

He didn't dare think about how Yue Qingyuan had felt in the original work, after Luo Binghe chopped off "Shen Qingqiu's" legs and sent them to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect in a brocade box. He didn't dare imagine what kind of emotions Yue Qingyuan had held as he'd walked unflinchingly into

Luo Binghe's trap, despite knowing there was no return, until he was pierced with ten thousand arrows.

To think that a lifetime's single moment of loyalty actually had to be repaid with so much.

And Yue Qingyuan hadn't even been able to tell "Shen Qingqiu" the reason why he hadn't come to rescue him—the "Shen Qingqiu" who'd been full of resentment and terror, who'd helped Luo Binghe lead him into that trap.

Why hadn't he told him earlier?

It was just like Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe.

Why hadn't he told him earlier?

If he hadn't been so cavalier, so full of conjecture, Luo Binghe might never have darkened. He could have remained the sweet and bashful disciple he'd been on Qing Jing Peak.

Even if they backed up ten thousand steps, back to when he'd been forced to shove Luo Binghe into the Endless Abyss, Shen Qingqiu could have used a completely different method to achieve his goal. He might not even have needed to thank about it. Only now did Shen Qingqiu understand that if he had wanted Luo Binghe to go down into the abyss, it was very possible that if he had but said the word, Luo Binghe would have obeyed and jumped.

Shen Qingqiu had never considered this possibility. He hadn't believed that a person could be so foolish, that Luo Binghe could be so obedient.

But the truth was that Luo Binghe really *was* that foolish and that obedient.

Shen Qingqiu had twisted and turned, taken all sort of detours. He'd taken the far road and become utterly lost, not knowing how to proceed. Full of regret and sorrows, he could only sigh, "If only I had known."

But in this world, there was no "if only I had known."

As they turned past the cavern, Shen Qingqiu suddenly saw two figures caked in dirt. As soon as he made out the two round and shiny bald heads, he blurted out, "Master Wu Chen. Master Wu Wang."

The short monk who was carrying someone much taller than himself was Master Wu Chen. One of his wooden prosthetic legs was missing. Walking alone on a single leg was already difficult, and on top of that he had no hands to spare for a palms-together greeting. Refusing to be discourteous, he chose to recite some extra sutras instead. “Amitabha, Peak Lord Shen. We finally found you. What happened to Sect Leader Yue?”

Ever since he’d closed his eyes, Yue Qingyuan had been drowsily leaning against Shen Qingqiu. Shen Qingqiu said, “Zhangmen-shixiong… was struck on the head by a rock. What about Master Wu Wang?”

“Injured by that Tianlang-Jun’s demonic qi and unconscious for now. With the cave’s collapse, those demons completely disappeared.”

Shen Qingqiu pulled out Xiu Ya and handed it over. “Master, can I ask you to take my shixiong, and Master Wu Wang, and leave Mai Gu Ridge by sword?

“What about Peak Lord Shen?” asked Wu Chen.

“I will deal with my own disciple,” Shen Qingqiu said concisely.

“If Peak Lord Shen is willing to calmly face him, there could be nothing better,” Wu Chen said respectfully.

“I’m ashamed of myself,” said Shen Qingqiu. “But I wish to resolve these affairs before something irreparable occurs. I leave Zhangmen-shixiong to Master Wu Chen. After you head down, please take him to Qian Cao Peak’s Mu-shidi. This Shen is deeply grateful.”

Wu Chen put down Wu Wang and received Xiu Ya with both hands. He bowed, then suddenly said, “Inner demons[11] arise due to obsession.”

Shen Qingqiu startled. “Is Master trying to say that to eliminate his inner demons, we must cure his obsession?”

But Wu Chen shook his head. “If it were curable, it wouldn’t be an obsession.”

“I thought so too.” Shen Qingqiu returned the bow, then spun around.

Who’d made him the object of Luo Binghe’s obsession?

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The interior of Mai Gu Ridge had collapsed into a complete mess. Before, there had been hundreds upon thousands of caves, sprawling and interconnected, but now half of them had crumbled with the tremors, the fallen rocks forming barricades everywhere.

Shen Qingqiu wove through the remains, struggling to navigate the ruins.

Suddenly, from within a giant pile of rubble, there came a feeble wisp of demonic energy.

Shen Qingqiu called without thinking, “Luo Binghe?”

It couldn’t be that Luo Binghe was trapped here, having been sealed by Yue Qingyuan’s binding technique, could it?

He leapt over to the pile and lifted the topmost stone slab. Underneath was a stretch of battered green scales. Small, loose pebbles tumbled off them as they rose and fell weakly. Zhuzhi-Lang’s snake form was coiled into a small fortress, and Tianlang-Jun lay in the middle, sheltered within the watertight hold.

The latter’s body had deteriorated even further, to the point it seemed his head would fall off at any moment. He opened his eyes and looked at Shen Qingqiu, then even had the cheer to greet him. “Peak Lord Shen.”

“How is the situation with you two?” said Shen Qingqiu.

“I’m long since used to this. But Zhuzhi-Lang isn’t doing too well.”

Not doing too well indeed.

Those two huge yellow eyes, once always as bright as lanterns, had begun glazing over, though there was still life in them. Quite a few of his snake scales had been scraped off, leaving stretches of red and black wounds that patterned his entire body.

Shen Qingqiu helped remove the stones crushing the snake’s tail, then realized that Zheng Yang was still stabbed into Zhuzhi-Lang’s body. He reached to grab the hilt, then yanked the sword out. Blood loss meant very little to demons. Rather, having Zheng Yang and its powerful spiritual energy stabbed into him would have done far more harm.

“Hasn’t Peak Lord Shen always preferred to ignore him?” asked Tianlang-Jun.

“Who says I’ve always ignored him?” said Shen Qingqiu. “It’s just that sometimes communicating with him is difficult. How…is he?”

Tianlang-Jun “stroked” the snake’s triangular head with the stump of his arm and didn’t answer. Instead he asked, “What will Peak Lord Shen do about the situation after this?”

“Destroy the sword, of course.”

“Xin Mo’s invasion has already reached Luo Binghe’s soul, binding their lives together. If you destroy the sword now, won’t that be the same as killing him?”

“Then I’ll think up another method,” Shen Qingqiu said resolutely.

“Even if you’re unable to stop the merge in time?”

Shen Qingqiu drew in a breath. “If I can’t make it, then that’s that!” he said irritably. “We should do everything we can first, then worry about the rest later.”

At that, another smile finally appeared on Tianlang-Jun’s face. He sighed and lamented, “As expected, I can’t bring myself to hate humans.”

Shen Qingqiu didn’t know how to respond to this line of his. It was joyful yet seemed far too heavy. “What about Luo Binghe?” he asked to change the topic. “Have you seen him?”

“I thought Peak Lord Shen knew,” Tianlang-Jun said, bemused. “Hasn’t he been behind you this whole time?”

Shen Qingqiu’s hair stood on end, and he slowly turned his head. Sure enough, Luo Binghe stood behind him, eyes fixed unswervingly on his back.

Exactly when had he begun standing there? Or perhaps the question was: Exactly when had he begun following Shen Qingqiu?

Luo Binghe smiled. “Shizun, give me the sword.”

Shen Qingqiu maintained his composure and raised Xin Mo. “You can come take it yourself.”

Luo Binghe took a step toward him, then suddenly stopped. The corner of his mouth twitched, and his shoulders began to shake.

Shen Qingqiu held the sword horizontally in front him. “What’s wrong?”

Luo Binghe gritted his teeth. “Get lost.”

Shen Qingqiu hadn’t managed to respond when Luo Binghe pressed a hand to his temple, then lashed out with a spiritual blast. “Get lost, all of you—don’t touch him. *Get lost!*”

Those words weren’t meant for Shen Qingqiu, and the spiritual blast didn’t strike him either. Instead, it grazed his shoulder, blasting apart the already pitted cave wall behind him.

Tianlang-Jun offered a friendly reminder: “Xin Mo conjures illusions.”

Even without him saying so, Shen Qingqiu had about guessed as much. At present, Luo Binghe clearly saw things no one else could. From his hand came haphazard blasts of spiritual energy and demonic qi, and he specifically attacked the space around Shen Qingqiu, engaged in brutal combat with a nonexistent enemy. The mountain began to shake again, clusters of rocks rolling down. Shen Qingqiu looked at the two people by them, who could be fairly described as “the sick and elderly.”

“Binghe!” he yelled. “Come here!”

Though Luo Binghe looked somewhat dazed, he was still very obedient. Sure enough, he began to follow Shen Qingqiu.

The one in front dashed with the wind beneath his heels, while the one in back seemed to drift like a wraith, though he somehow didn’t fall behind in the slightest.

In the middle of the chase, the System sent a notification:

Luo Binghe’s base anger points: 300. Multiplied by Xin Mo’s coefficient of 10, the current value is 3,000.

“Where’s the key item?!” Shen Qingqiu roared. “Hurry the fuck up! The jade Guanyin! The jade pendant! Give it here quickly!”

Greetings, the key item is currently loading in. We recommend deploying another tool in the interim.

“Loading?! The fu—what other tools are there?! Show me!”

Gentle reminder: The Small Scenario Pusher, Luxury Edition that you recently upgraded has yet to be used.

Shen Qingqiu abruptly braked.

In all honesty, to this day he still hadn’t figured out exactly what kind of doodad this “Small Scenario Pusher” was, let alone how it worked. But based on his single experience with it before, it really did seem to be…quite effective!

Shen Qingqiu gritted his teeth. “Give it here!”

Let this great one see just how epic and thrilling this luxury edition is! Bring it on!

He’d just forcefully slammed the “Confirm” button when the ground beneath his feet collapsed again.

As he fell, Shen Qingqiu had only one thought: *Fuck me, you call that a Small Scenario Pusher? It’s a Large Scenario Bulldozer!*

However, even after a long downward tumble, while rocky shadows rolled toward him from overhead, none of the rocks from the landslide smashed into him. Someone was shielding him from above.

Luo Binghe was completely out of his mind, his senses muddled, but even at a time like this, he used his own body to block the rocks for Shen Qingqiu.

With a backhanded shove, he flung the boulders that had struck his back aside like they weighed nothing. He stared blankly down into Shen Qingqiu’s eyes, and for a brief second, clarity seemed to flash through his pupils. But after a dazed blink, the murk returned.

The dark-red mark of sin crept over his forehead, expanding outward until marks covered the entirety of his snow-pale face, then continued spreading down his neck. Xin Mo had fallen beside them, and it seemed to respond to the marks on Luo Binghe’s body: it glowed and dimmed, its purple light and black miasma circulating endlessly.

“Shizun?” Luo Binghe mumbled.

“Mm,” said Shen Qingqiu.

Blood trickled down Luo Binghe’s forehead, and his voice seemed to quaver slightly. “Shizun, is it really you?”

“…Mm.”

“It’s real this time?” asked Luo Binghe. “Didn’t you leave with the others just now? I saw you go.”

“I won’t leave,” said Shen Qingqiu.

Luo Binghe slowly lowered his body and pressed his face into the gap of Shen Qingqiu’s collar. “Shizun, it hurts,” he said in a tiny voice. “My head hurts.”

The tone sounded both like he was acting cute and like it really did hurt, very much so. Shen Qingqiu slowly reached out with both arms, wrapping them around Luo Binghe’s shoulders. Then he gently patted Luo Binghe while soothing him like one would a child. “Good boy. It’ll stop hurting soon.”

“If I’m good, I’ll stop hurting, and Shizun won’t leave me alone ever again?” said Luo Binghe.

“It’ll stop hurting in a moment.”

“I don’t believe you,” Luo Binghe said quietly. Suddenly, he exploded and yelled, “I don’t believe you! I don’t!”

Seeing that he was having another episode, Shen Qingqiu grabbed his shoulders and abruptly lifted himself up, head raised.

The angle wasn’t right. Teeth clacked against teeth, making pain radiate through him. Luo Binghe’s lips were sealed, but his eyes continued to stare forward blankly. He blinked once, then twice.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes were also open. As their wide-eyed gazes remained fixed on each other, Shen Qingqiu internally thought this extremely unsettling.

After a while of just staring at each other, eyes completely unclosed, he finally gave in and shut his eyes first. With a flutter of his lashes, he pressed forward and deepened the kiss.

His teeth and mouth were still ringing and numb from the collision. In truth, this act couldn't be called kissing at all, but gnawing.

However, Luo Binghe was clearly very pleased with said gnawing. He bit all over Shen Qingqiu's lips like they were pieces of candy, his breaths growing shorter and shorter. Suddenly, he pressed Shen Qingqiu down against the ground.

With a ripping noise, Shen Qingqiu's outer robe was torn to pieces. Shen Qingqiu moved to strip his remaining clothes himself. He pulled and tugged, sliding his pants down below his knees, stripping his torso until only a loose inner robe remained, which slipped down to reveal one pale shoulder.

Luo Binghe's hand ran along the collar and dipped inside. His entire body was searing hot, even more so than that time in the Holy Mausoleum, and his hand kneaded hard over Shen Qingqiu's skin.

Hot, in pain, and panicking.

Shen Qingqiu knew what would follow. He'd long since made up his mind. Now he consciously flipped himself over so that his back was to Luo Binghe.

Though he had no experience with this kind of thing, he'd heard before that for the first time, it was easier from the back. Even though deep down he thought this position a little humiliating, he couldn't care about that much now.

He'd done this out of consideration for Luo Binghe's convenience, but unexpectedly, he was flipped back around. Luo Binghe jammed himself between Shen Qingqiu's legs, his entire attention rapt on Shen Qingqiu's face. Only a few inches remained between them, their steaming breaths intermingling.

Something blazing hot pressed against the dry entrance of Shen Qingqiu's lower half, its circumference a little terrifying, not unlike that of a full-sized ball. Due to the slight moisture at its tip, the tight entrance managed to take it in, just a little.

Luo Binghe didn't slam himself in right away. He was in a daze, but he still insisted on staring at Shen Qingqiu's face while he pressed tiny, scattered kisses to his cheek, little by little. Originally, Shen Qingqiu's nerves had been stretched taut, but with these subconscious actions on Luo Binghe’s part, he relaxed a bit.

He’d relaxed too early. Shen Qingqiu finally experienced what it felt like to be “split in half down the middle while still alive.”

Out of his mind with pain, he kicked his legs out and jerked away. Luo Binghe clamped down on his waist and dragged him back. Shen Qingqiu’s back scraped over the rough rocks, his flesh burning and stinging.

The sudden eruption of agony wiped Shen Qingqiu’s mind clean. Like a fish suspended out of water, he began to struggle violently. But the more he struggled, the less stable Luo Binghe’s mental state became: his eyes were crimson, his breaths disordered, his mind in chaos. All he could think about was holding on to Shen Qingqiu and thrusting himself in to the hilt.

The thickest part had already entered. Together with the long shaft, it pressed in toward his insides. Shen Qingqiu braced his hands against Luo Binghe’s chest, but the iron grasp on his waist left him unable to move. His legs were pressed back against his chest, his backside raised high, so he was powerless to stop his insides from being forced open.

He swallowed down his screams, doing his best to relax and open himself more, let Luo Binghe slide himself into his depths.

Once everything was inside, Shen Qingqiu felt like he’d been impaled by a rod of hot iron, nailed alive to a sacrificial stone. Luo Binghe seemed to have finally found some small sense of security. He grasped Shen Qingqiu’s hair, lifting and kissing it.

Thought he could ignore the sting of his scalp, the shift in position gave Shen Qingqiu the terrifying, if mistaken, impression that his insides were being jostled. His entrance spasmed uncontrollably from the pain. In his stupor, Luo Binghe knew no restraint. He only understood his own exhilaration and began to ruthlessly thrust in and out.

His movements were both quick and rough. After over a hundred uneven thrusts that alternated between fast and slow, he finally managed to smoothly and continuously bury himself inside.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes flooded with hot tears.

It hurt.

It hurt so much.

He was trembling from the pain, but he didn’t forget what he should do next. He sent forth his spiritual energy, drawing the surging demonic qi within Luo Binghe’s body into himself.

This technique was incredibly stupid, but it was also incredibly effective. As Luo Binghe was supplying Xin Mo with demonic qi, by drawing a portion of it into himself, it no longer received enough power, so Mai Gu Ridge’s descent naturally couldn’t continue.

Shen Qingqiu took that object as it viciously slammed in and out, his hole twitching. Nothing had ever breached this place before, and the tender flesh of his walls was rubbed raw and swollen. Initially, the thrusts had been slightly jerky, but with the spates of burning pain, blood and fluids gradually provided enough lubrication to smooth out their joining.

Within the darkness, the wafting stench of blood pervaded around them. Pained, suppressed gasps and the sound of flesh slapping on flesh rang especially clear.

Luo Binghe was enthusiastic, clutching at Shen Qingqiu and refusing to let go. His cheek rubbed against Shen Qingqiu’s head, the action both docile and meek, but his bottom half told an entirely different story and could have been called savage.

Shen Qingqiu could barely breathe within his grip, and his right hand clawed at the rocky ground, leaving behind trails of blood. Each breath he struggled to draw stuttered and caught as he gasped down air.

He couldn’t hold on.

He really couldn’t hold on anymore.

Just as his head swam, his vision growing dark and darker…a faint beam of light flashed by him.

There was a crisp clang of something hitting the ground, right next to Shen Qingqiu’s bare shoulder.

Alarmed, Luo Binghe looked up, and for a brief moment, he seemed disoriented.

Then his pupils abruptly shrank into pinpoints. The blurry scene before him gradually focused and came together, becoming clearer and clearer.

He slowly lowered his head, and all the color drained from his face on the spot.

Shen Qingqiu lay below him, robes torn into countless pieces. His legs were trembling, unable to close, his eyes frightfully red, like he was on his last breath.

Luo Binghe reached out, wanting to touch him but also not daring to. His hand remained frozen in midair as he muttered, “Shi…zun?”

Once he heard Luo Binghe finally calling him “Shizun” as normal, Shen Qingqiu seemed to come alive, and he gasped in a breath. Unfortunately, due to how strained this breath was, it almost sounded like a sob.

Luo Binghe was stunned. “Shizun…what… What did I do?”

Shen Qingqiu wanted to clear his throat, to lighten the mood a little and say something like “You didn’t do much, just your Shizun.” However, the result was that he didn’t manage to clear his throat and rather coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Both of them froze in shock at the sight.

Shen Qingqiu’s tears hadn’t had the chance to come out before Luo Binghe’s began falling first. They plopped onto Shen Qingqiu’s cheek, sliding down the curve of it.

In the past, Shen Qingqiu’s greatest fear had been women crying, and now his greatest fear was Luo Binghe crying. He ignored the pain in his bottom half and wiped at Luo Binghe’s face, comforting him like he was soothing a child: “Don’t cry, hm?”

Luo Binghe’s tears fell like pearls cut from their string, rolling down along his shoulder. He helplessly held Shen Qingqiu with one arm while muttering, “Shizun, don’t hate me… I didn’t know… I never wanted to hurt you… Why didn’t you push me away? Why didn’t you kill me?”

Shen Qingqiu stroked his back gently, again and again. “This master knows. This master was willing.”

He soothed him, but within his heart was endless bleakness.

He was the one who'd been "wrecked," all right? So how come the guy who'd wrecked him was crying harder than he was? What was with this reversal where the guy who got fucked had to comfort the one who'd fucked him?

A Luo Binghe who'd lost his virginity was even more demanding than a young maiden who'd lost hers!

"Then…if you'd pull out first…" Shen Qingqiu said helplessly.

Luo Binghe's eyelashes still hung heavy with tears, but he couldn't afford to worry about his shyness or how he wasn't done crying, and he pulled out with utmost care.

He stared blankly at the horrible sight between Shen Qingqiu's legs, his face growing increasingly pale. Even so, he carefully tidied Shen Qingqiu's inner robe, then draped his own outer robe on top of him.

Shen Qingqiu didn't dare look down himself. He slowly closed his legs, the muscles of his face twitching as he did so. Still, he did his best to school his expression into something less pained.

To divert Luo Binghe's gaze and attention, Shen Qingqiu reached out and picked up the jade Guanyin beside him, then gestured at Luo Binghe to lower his head.

Luo Binghe stammered, "I thought… I thought I had long since lost it… I thought I'd never find it again…"

Shen Qingqiu helped to loop the red string around his neck. "Hold on to it from now on. Don't lose it again."

“After Shizun rescued me that time, could it be that he…he’s kept it with him ever since?” Luo Binghe mumbled.

It had been in the System’s storage system the entire time, so saying that he had couldn’t be considered wrong, right? Once he thought this, Shen Qingqiu feebly nodded once.

Luo Binghe’s arm around him slowly tightened. As his tears continued to flow, he suddenly noticed that the marks on his arm were rapidly receding. His blazing-hot forehead and cheeks were also cooling at an incredible speed. Stunned, he said, “What are you doing?”

Shen Qingqiu hugged him firmly, forcefully locking Luo Binghe against the crook of his arm so he couldn’t flail around. “I’m not doing anything,” he said lowly. “Like I told you, it’ll stop hurting soon. So be good and don’t move.”

Luo Binghe’s voice cracked. “Shizun, are you going to do what you did last time and use your own body to draw away Xin Mo’s demonic qi?”

The “last time” he referred to was the time when Shen Qingqiu had self-detonated. It must have left an enormous impact on him.

“It’s different this time,” said Shen Qingqiu.

Luo Binghe slowly clenched his fist. “Different how?” he asked, voice quavering. “Shizun, how can you do this to me? To think you would actually do the same thing a second time—for the sake of other people! Do you feel that…I can watch you do this sort of thing right before me again?! I should have realized long ago that none of you would ever choose me. Every single one of you would rather throw me away—”

“Listen to me, Luo Binghe!” Shen Qingqiu said severely.

Sure enough, Luo Binghe held back his tears and obediently listened.

“In order to give birth to you, Su Xiyan fought to the death. Luo Binghe, oh, Luo Binghe. Why did you never consider it? Given the kind of person the Old Palace Master was, would he have given his disciple a gentle, harmless drug?

“It must have been a drug that was absolutely fatal to demons. If she really had given in and obediently taken it, even if you hadn’t died, how could you have peacefully grown up, unharmed, into who you are today?”

Luo Binghe's shoulders trembled.

Shen Qingqiu made sure to emphasize every word. "If I were her, no matter how venomous that drug was, I would have drunk it down without hesitation, then escaped the Water Prison. Afterward, I would draw all its effects into my own body. No matter how agonizing the process, no matter if the price would be the complete destruction of my martial aspect, no matter if it meant a horrible death: I absolutely would not allow my child to suffer even an ounce of harm.

"This is my conclusion. You can think that it's only a theory, because there's no longer anyone who can tell you what Su Xiyan was thinking before she breathed her last. But if she really had seen you as her shame, she wouldn't have needed to do a thing. Those were the coldest days of the year, with ice and snow everywhere. If she'd thrown you into the Luo River, could you have survived?

"Or, she could have kept her bright and boundless future as the head disciple of Huan Hua Palace and continued to drink any fresh poison the Old Palace Master gave her. Then she wouldn't have needed to flee the prison in disgrace or hide from the Huan Hua Palace disciples who searched for her. Moreover, if, after giving birth to you on that lone ship, she hadn't taken off her outer robe and swaddled you in it, if she hadn't used the last of her strength to place you in that basin and push you out and away…you would never have lasted long enough for someone to rescue you. You would have become a mere lone spirit, frozen to death upon the Luo River.

"You're alive, right here and now—so how can you just listen to and believe what others say when they claim that your mother was cold and heartless, that she didn't truly want you?"

Having said all this in one go, Shen Qingqiu was now short of breath, and there was the sensation of demonic qi rampaging through his limbs and bones. He used his remaining strength to clutch Luo Binghe's wrist.

"I'm not drawing away Xin Mo's evil energy for anyone else—or any*thing* else. I do it for you and only you," he said. "I…I don't want to see a Luo Binghe who spends the rest of his life controlled by Xin Mo, whose mind is lost to its corrosion, with illusions haunting him for all eternity.

"This master's expectations are for you to be alive and clear minded, strong and healthy." Then he said softly, "So don't say that no one wants you—or that no one will choose you—ever again.”

As Luo Binghe knelt by Shen Qingqiu’s side, his eyes could finally bear the weight of his tears no longer, and they rolled down his face, like he was a child who’d been wronged.

He had only ever been a child. Walking the world alone, tripping and stumbling countless times. Wanting only those few things, yet never able to grasp them. If only Shen Qingqiu had realized this earlier, he thought, he’d have definitely…definitely…

But like he’d said before, within this world, there had never been any such thing as “if only I had known.”

Luo Binghe suddenly broke out into a tearful smile. He grabbed Shen Qingqiu’s hand with his own and held it to his cheek, then with his other hand, picked Xin Mo up from the ground.

The blade, still circulating with purple light, let out a terrifying shriek. Next to Shen Qingqiu there came the sound of something tearing, inch by inch.

“Shizun, I know why you said all these things.” Luo Binghe stared unswervingly at Shen Qingqiu, the corner of his mouth tugging up a little. “However, if Shizun is no longer here, if the only person in this world who holds these expectations for me no longer exists, then me being alive and clear minded, healthy and strong…what meaning would any of that have?”

Luo Binghe’s fever seemed to have infected him too—Shen Qingqiu was feeling a little dizzy.

In his daze, he almost couldn’t hear what Luo Binghe was saying anymore, and he was unable to stop Luo Binghe as he destroyed the sword. Dimly, he had the thought that this was fine.

“Dying together” also included a “together.”

It didn’t seem that bad.

But then came a voice that he could still hear clearly—

Congratulations! By hitting target values in all categories, the honored customer has been upgraded to a beginner-level VIP account. Would you like to activate the high-level ability “Self-Saving”?

***

Proud Immortal Demon Way was a male power fantasy of a stallion novel. Since the very beginning, the author "Great Master" Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky had been very certain when it came to this matter.

Furthermore, Shen Qingqiu was an unabashed straight man, one whose straightness the heavens themselves could attest to. Since his birth, he had also been very certain when it came to this matter.

So, if back when he'd just opened this baffling book, this *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, which was so full of landmines that it was practically high art, to the point that those landmines had become its very style—if, back then, someone had said to Shen Yuan, "Oh, you'll go gay. Plus you'll be going gay with the novel's male lead. And on top of that, you'll even lie down and surrender yourself to him—"

He would definitely have grabbed the brick that was the entire fifty-volume set and showed them what their brains looked like when splattered across the ground.

Now he drifted within the virtual space he'd passed through back when he first entered this world, and he was listening to the System's friendly Google Translate-like voice, the same as it had always been, echo in every corner.

Greetings! Through your tireless efforts and active cooperation, all point values have met their upgrade targets.

The System is very pleased to inform you that this honored customer has already been upgraded to a beginner-level VIP account. At this time, we will specially remind you that VIP accounts may activate the high-level ability "Self-Saving."

In the event that your HP falls below the lowest possible value, you have a one-time opportunity to restore your life bar to full.

Restore his life bar to full!

This VIP treatment is really fucking kind, huh?

"About that," said Shen Qingqiu. "This 'Self-Saving' ability can only be used once? And only on myself?"

Your understanding is correct.

An incredibly serious problem instantly occurred to Shen Qingqiu. He'd already drawn the majority of Luo Binghe's demonic qi into himself, so even if Xin Mo was destroyed, it wouldn't affect Luo Binghe. However, because they'd both thought he was probably done for, that child had sobbed about wanting to die with him as well. If Shen Qingqiu used this Self-Saving ability, Luo Binghe had better not go and foolishly kill himself to be with him!

"What about Luo Binghe?" Shen Qingqiu asked urgently. "How is he now?"

With your present access, you are not permitted to inquire about issues related to the central power source. Would you like to see your achievement history?

Why couldn't he inquire if he was already a VIP member?! Shen Qingqiu was out of his mind with worry, but if he couldn't, he couldn't, and if the System wouldn't let him, it wouldn't let him. No matter how anxious he was, it was useless.

The System persisted relentlessly: ***Would you like to see your achievement history?***

So basically, he had no choice but to look at this thing. Shen Qingqiu waved his hand. "I'll look, I'll look. Hurry up and show me!"

Accompanied by a burst of joyful, bubbly background music, the System unrolled a list of achievements:

Avoided more than twenty landmines! The "Laden with Landmines" tag was removed. Unlocked the achievement "Rather a Lot of Things to Roast."

Highest B-Point balance exceeded 5,000! Unlocked the achievement "Readable If Nothing Else Is Available."

Encountered more than three explosions of third-rate melodrama! Unlocked the achievement "Mired in Melodrama."

Cut away extra padding and irrelevant side plots! The "Peerless God of Filler" tag was removed.

Patched in all hidden characters and filled in all basic plot holes! The "Holes, Holes Everywhere" tag was removed.

Total satisfaction points surpassed countable limits! Unlocked the achievement "Good Enough for a Jerk Off."

You have achieved the System's recommended standards. A one-line summary: The story of a lovesick, love-deficient chuunibyou who tried to destroy the world.

When Shen Qingqiu read this line, he could only stare in silence.

What kind of rebuttal could he even make to that? Goodbye.

Thinking about it more closely, ever since he'd entered this book, *Proud Immortal Demon Way* really had been transfigured from a male fantasy stallion novel with no bottom line into a convoluted, hyper-melodramatic love story full of ups and downs, starring a purehearted nutjob of a male virgin.

Looking at this column of sparkling awards, Shen Qingqiu suddenly realized that in the top left corner of the list, was a small, pink symbol: "♀"

He knew that the ♂ symbol meant men while ♀ meant women, and he thought this a bit strange. "What does this symbol refer to?"

It indicates that all the achievements on this list are woman-oriented honors.

"You've got to be kidding."

Proud Immortal Demon Way's genre has already been revised.

Wait.

Why had it been categorized as women's fiction?!

So that was why this bizarre, melodramatic story line had still managed to acquire so many awards? Because it'd already been categorized as woman-oriented, and so it had been scored according to the standards of women's fiction?!

And why did women's fiction have an achievement like "Good Enough for a Jerk Off"? What were they jerking off?!

Could it be that the story had been moved from Zhongdian Literature’s main site to the women’s section? Or even more terrifyingly, after changing sites entirely, had it been tossed into the infamous green sea of Jinjiang?!

At this moment, upon realizing the truth, a giant mouthful of blood, which Shen Qingqiu had been keeping down since his first day of transmigration, which he’d managed to suppress for many years, finally sprayed out like a fountain.

With this, a crowd of dark faces zeroed in around him, robes rustling.

Ning Yingying, Ming Fan, Qi Qingqi, Mu Qingfang, an entire gaggle of people squeezed right up to him, all talking at once and saying things like: “Oh no, Shizun coughed up blood! Will Shizun die?” and “No, once he’s coughed it up, he’ll be fine.”

Cold, damp walls surrounded them. Via the two small candles, Shen Qingqiu just managed to recognize the location as the Lingxi Caves when the bouncing echoes made his head to spasm with pain. He couldn’t hear anything clearly and hunched over, clutching his head.

Then came Liu Qingge’s voice. “Go away, all of you!”

As soon as he spoke, everyone else immediately shut up. The junior generation stuck out their tongues and retreated unhappily. The space they left behind was taken up by Liu Qingge. He stood next to the stone bed, arms crossed.

Having finally seen someone reliable, Shen Qingqiu grabbed him. “Where’s Luo Binghe?”

Liu Qingge’s face was dark. “He’s dead!”

“…Dead?”

Had he really gone and foolishly committed a lover’s suicide?!

Liu Qingge didn’t seem to be telling a joke, and neither had he ever really joked around. Shen Qingqiu abruptly sat up, but his movements were simply too fast, and a dull pain suddenly radiated from his bottom half.

His face twisted immediately, then with a thump, he fell back down.

This reaction of his was too over-the-top. Liu Qingge seemed to have received a massive shock, and he stumbled back three steps. Then he turned about awkwardly, as if he wanted to walk back up and say something but also like he wanted to just up and flee.

Qi Qingqi grabbed him. “Look at what you’ve done!” she shrieked. “Look! What did you do that for?! We told you not to scare him, and now you’ve gone and scared him so much, he fainted!”

While lying on the stone bed, Shen Qingqiu raised his hand. “I didn’t faint. I…”

It was just that a certain place hurt, so he’d slipped…

In the past, little had scared Ning Yingying more than the Bai Zhan Peak Lord, but this time she bravely snapped at Liu Qingge, stomping her feet. “Liu-shishu, how could you do that? Even if you don’t like A-Luo, you know Shizun has just woken up and can’t take too much excitement, and you—you still said something so irresponsible! Cursing him by claiming he’s dead…”

Mu Qingfang’s face was also full of reproach. “Liu-shixiong, you really shouldn’t act like that toward a patient. It’s not good at all.”

This was Liu Qingge’s first mass scolding. He’d never been good with words, so he simply retreated to the table and burst out with an, “I’m not talking anymore!”

Shen Qingqiu pressed one hand to his temple and the other on his waist. “Someone tell me already: Is he dead or not?”

“He’s not!” Qi Qingqi said. “That brat thought you were done for and almost tried to follow you, but right before, Mu-shidi said you were fine and still breathing. How could he bear to die then?”

Thank god they hadn’t passed each other by in another twist of fate. No one could take another one of those unfortunate coincidences.

Shen Qingqiu knew that Liu Qingge had just been venting his anger, but he really had been scared stiff for a few seconds. “Peak Lord Liu, could you not?” he criticized him, feeling like he’d lost some face. “I asked you first because I trust you. You really disappointed me.”

Liu Qingge glared at him.

Shen Qingqiu wasn't afraid of him glaring. He slowly sat back up and picked a position that wouldn't put too much painful pressure on the key body part in question. "What happened, exactly? How did I return to Qing Jing Peak? What happened to Mai Gu Ridge? Where's Luo Binghe?"

"Don't worry about Mai Gu Ridge," said Qi Qingqi. "It exploded some time ago."

"Exploded?" Shen Qingqiu echoed.

"Didn't you and Luo Binghe destroy Xin Mo within Mai Gu Ridge?" Qi Qingqi asked. "When the sword broke, the entire mountain exploded."

Ming Fan popped his head in at his bedside. "That's right, Shizun, half the mountain smashed into the ice and left a huge hole. Afterward, the Luo River thawed. You and Luo Binghe both fell into it. It was Liu-shishu who fished the two of you out."

Shen Qingqiu was in the process of taking the tea Ning Yingying had offered and getting ready to drink it. Good thing he hadn't, because otherwise he'd definitely have spewed it everywhere.

"The two of us?"

Shen Qingqiu guiltily glanced at Liu Qingge out of the corner of his eye. If he hadn't remembered wrong—and how could you misremember something like that?—he and Luo Binghe had just finished doing that thing!

Though Luo Binghe had put his robe on Shen Qingqiu after, the proof of guilt would have remained on his body, and with Liu Qingge's razor-sharp vision, it'd have been stranger if he hadn't seen anything wrong.

No wonder Liu Qingge had been looking at him with such a severe expression the entire time, like he was raring for some disciplinary action. Shen Qingqiu had offended public decency and brought shame to their sect!

"He fished up the two of you in one go," Qi Qingqi prattled on. "You were clutching each other like stiff corpses and impossible to separate. So many people were watching! Aren't you ashamed? Our respected Cang Qiong Mountain…"

So they'd been in plain view of everyone. That was really…

Shen Qingqiu was filled with ten thousand regrets. Ever after all his efforts, he still hadn't been able to stop the *Regret of Chunshan* from acquiring new material.

But to think that Luo Binghe, with his thought process, hadn't simply gone and absconded with him. He'd even docilely sent him back to Qing Jing Peak. This was really profoundly strange. Thinking this too unusual, Shen Qingqiu persisted in his questions. "Then where exactly is Luo Binghe now?"

In the end it was still Ning Yingying who was the most obedient and filial. "Shizun, you slept for so many days without waking up. Of course he went to look for spirit herbs for you."

Look for what spirit herbs? By some great stroke of luck Shen Qingqiu had escaped certain death and come back with a full life bar. And that brat hadn't knelt by his bed waiting for him to wake but left to run about?! *This is the sort of trivial matter that should be foisted off on your lackeys!*

Ning Yingying then muttered quietly, "Wasn't it because all the shishu and shibo chased him off the mountain…?"

Shen Qingqiu didn't even bother pretending to be cold and aloof. Unable to keep his face still, he let out a stifled laugh.

Luo Binghe had offended far too many Cang Qiong Mountain Sect members, so it made sense that they had run him off. But now Luo Binghe actually understood to swallow his anger and words and had let himself be chased away. It was honestly pretty pitiful.

However, as long as nothing was wrong, that was good.

Like hell nothing was wrong!

Shen Qingqiu's face paled with horror. "Zhangmen-shixiong!"

How could he have forgotten? There was still the matter of Yue Qingyuan, who'd been at death's door!

He rushed to flip himself back upright, then stuffed his feet in his shoes and ran outside. The others hadn't expected him to suddenly jump out of the bed. They were all stunned for a moment, but then they ran after him.

Mu Qingfang called, "Shen-shixiong, you should really lie back down—"

In a single breath, he'd run out of the Lingxi Caves, the crisp, damp fragrance from the mountain suffusing his nose. Suddenly, a glittering bloom of golden fireworks exploded at the far edge of the pitch-black night sky. When he listened carefully, he heard the clamor of voices drifting over from Qiong Ding Peak.

“What's going on?” Shen Qingqiu asked as he put his shoes on properly. “Why is there so much noise coming from Qiong Ding Peak? Where's Zhangmen-shixiong?”

Qi Qingqi straightened her crooked bodice and said peevishly, “So you did remember to ask after Zhangmen-shixiong a little. He's alive.”

Mu Qingfang smiled. “Shen-shixiong, you woke up at the perfect time. You won't miss the celebration.”

Upon hearing that Yue Qingyuan was safe and sound, Shen Qingqiu breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed like Yue Qingyuan drawing his sword in the fight on Mai Gu Ridge hadn't consumed his entire life force. If it had, Shen Qingqiu really wouldn't have known how to live with himself. And he couldn't say if anyone else knew Xuan Su's secret.

His musings then took a turn, and being incredibly bigheaded, he thought: *What celebration?*

Could it be to celebrate him waking up? There was no need to go to such efforts and make it this grand! Now he was embarrassed.

Liu Qingge seemed to have guessed Shen Qingqiu's thoughts, and he verbally slapped his face without hesitation. “It's to celebrate the successful prevention of the merge. Nothing to do with you.”

“Can't you just celebrate a bit for me on the side?” Shen Qingqiu asked sheepishly.

Since it was the kind of grand celebration held for a major event, where the entire world joined in on the jubilation, naturally the participants included more than the members of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. All the sects that had participated in the battle at Luo River, both large and small, had been invited. Qiong Ding Peak was a hubbub of voices, packed tightly with people as they jostled one another. Shen Qingqiu even saw quite a few familiar faces.

Those beautiful Daoist nun triplets were pestering a person with sweet and gentle words. In fact, it was a person who wore a veil, looked cool and elegant, and radiated an atmosphere of integrity: Liu Mingyan.

When Shen Qingqiu observed Luo Binghe's harem together now, not a one of them to be bested in beauty, he was filled with an intensely curious feeling. He looked on intently the way he always had, though he could no longer hold on to a male fantasy mentality while doing so. He sent two more side glances at them and only heard those three sisters say coquettishly, "Good Sister, Good Master, Good Senior, please give us an autograph."

"We went through so much difficulty to meet the author. Please leave us a momento."

"Is it truly to be discontinued, with no further reprints?"

Within their grasps they held a small, gaudy book, which they pushed into Liu Mingyan's hands. It looked incredibly familiar. Shen Qingqiu puzzled over it to himself and felt it merited his attention. He was just thinking about walking closer to see what the three giant words on the cover were when suddenly a skulking silhouette flashed by him.

Shen Qingqiu took a couple steps to catch up to that person and grabbed them. "You still have the guts to come to Qiong Ding Peak?" he asked in a chilly voice. "You're not afraid of Qi Qingqi cutting you into pieces?"

Having been caught, Shang Qinghua almost fell to his knees on the spot, but when he heard Shen Qingqiu, he breathed a long sigh of relief. "Why be like this, Cucumber-bro?" he asked as he turned around. "No matter what, the two of us are comrades from the same hometown, friends forged in the heat of battle. Don't be so quick to chase me out."

"Since you dared come to Cang Qiong Mountain, I assume you've already succeeded at whitewashing your reputation?"

"Correct," said Shang Qinghua. "I was afraid I'd scare you if I said so. I might soon return to being the An Ding Peak Lord. And it's all thanks to Bing-ge—may he live long and prosper."

"Yue Qingyuan is taking you back?"

"This is called the prodigal son's return, the wayward heir mending his ways. Besides, I've never done anything to offend the heavens, so why wouldn't he take me back?"

Shen Qingqiu let go of him and said angrily, "Zhangmen-shixiong is simply too kind."

Shang Qinghua straightened his collar. "Why else would he be so unfortunate? Kind people get taken advantage of."

Shen Qingqiu looked him up and down. "Due to all my blind fumbling around, your entire novel has been distorted beyond recognition. But you don't seem unsatisfied at all."

"I wouldn't say that," said Shang Qinghua. "Maybe to you, it was only blind fumbling that was as worthless as shit, but to Bing-ge, your blind fumbling might be the only meaning to the world's existence."

To think "Great Master" Airplane Shooting Towards could say such words!

Shen Qingqiu was horrified. "And who is this distinguished gentleman?"

"Don't be like that," Shang Qinghua said seriously. "I too am a young man with literary ideals, so of course I'd have my own thoughts and regrets."

Shen Qingqiu sneered. "What literary ideals? How come the only thing I could see in your book was fan service with no bottom line? And your writing speed of ten thousand words a day, with intermittent bursts of twenty thousand. *That* was your appeal. Without those underlying components, *Proud Immortal Demon Way* could never have made it past early serialization!"

Shang Qinghua shrugged. "Do you think I started out writing things with no moral integrity or bottom line? In the past, I wrote works of pure literature, but every single one flopped, so I could only start down the road of mass-market products. You must know that writing a novel is a lonely thing. Compared to writing the kind of stallion guy who's everywhere on Zhongdian, it's better to portray a male lead like the current Bing-ge, whose life is full of mishaps, whose personality is a bit more complex and full of contradictions and conflicts—that kind of weirdo. That's more in line with my writing philosophy."

"So, your writing philosophy is about writing gays?" Shen Qingqiu concluded.

"Are you looking down on gay protagonists? The arts and artists love portraying gays. Pure literature highly favors gays—you know that, right?"

Shang Qinghua raised his arms high. "Cucumber-bro," he said, impassioned, "if the System hadn't selected you, a loyal and die-hard reader, I'm afraid the plot would never have been distorted to this extent, right back to the outline I discarded. I wasn't able to withstand the loneliness in real life and caved to financial pressure, so I chose to finish *Proud Immortal Demon Way* in accordance with others' tastes. However, thanks to you, everything that I wanted to write has already played out before me. Cucumber-bro!" He clapped Shen Qingqiu's shoulder solemnly, filled with deep emotion. "You are the chosen one, and my career is at last wiped clear of regrets!"

Why did that make it sound like the System and this world were the creation of Shang Qinghua's regrets, as an author who'd had to scrap his outline in favor of popular opinion?

Shen Qingqiu found the idea of becoming this kind of "chosen one" too shameful. "Who's your die-hard reader?"

Shang Qinghua waved. "I won't talk to you about this," he said, unilaterally declaring his victory. "You're an anti-fan."

Shen Qingqiu was just about to say, "I'm only an anti, not a fan!"

But then he suddenly heard Shang Qinghua humming. Something like, "Love warms, grace weighs, our lips come together / I wish this night would last unto the morn' / All day all night unto eternity…"

The important part was that the tune was incredibly familiar—so familiar that Shen Qingqiu's hands and teeth itched. He pointed at Shang Qinghua. "Shang Qinghua, what are you humming?"

Shang Qinghua continued to hum. "We know not when one day becomes the next / Nor when Zheng Yang's sun will finally rest / The rustle of autumn, Xiu Ya unsheathed / Icy water gushes forth, choking sobs / We plead, unfulfilled, and we start again…"

Shen Qingqiu was in disbelief. "Fuck you. I dare you to sing another line!"

"Master Shen, why don't you listen to others? You absolutely must not fuck other people. Bing-ge will lose it. Let me tell you: right now, this *Regret of Chunshan* has become something like *The Eighteen Touches.*[12] The two of you are legendary gays known nationwide, get it? You can go ahead and shut me up. I don't care, because ultimately it'll be useless. You can't shut the mouths of everyone beneath the heavens…"

At last Shen Qingqiu beat the crap out of Shang Qinghua the way he'd always wanted to.

This *asshole*. This giant! Asshole!

This kind of plot hole-digging author—who not only refused to fill his holes, but left everything unfinished, who rejoiced as his characters jumped the shark all the way to Siberia, who even dragged his reader in to patch up his work, saying YOU CAN YOU UP—really deserved to be beaten to death!

He was just about ready to drag the whimpering Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky—currently prone like a corpse—into a small patch of pitch-black forest so he could continue with said beating when he heard a familiar voice chanting "Amitabha" behind him.

Master Wu Chen said, "Peak Lord Shen is safe and sound; truly a thousand fortunes."

Shen Qingqiu straightened and turned around to see the two abbots from Zhao Hua Monastery together with Yue Qingyuan, walking slowly in his direction.

He tossed Shang Qinghua aside and tidied himself a bit, then smiled sincerely from his heart. "Zhangmen-shixiong, Master Wu Chen, Master Wu Wang."

There was no trace of weakness in Yue Qingyuan's complexion as he smiled back. Wu Wang sent Shen Qingqiu a side glance, then walked off somewhere else, full of disdain. He had the expression of an old Daoist full of toxic feudal-era ideals who had just seen a fallen woman. Shen Qingqiu felt like he'd been struck by lightning and shivered.

"Please don't mind Wu Wang-shixiong, Peak Lord Shen," said Master Wu Chen. "Ever since this one lost his legs at Jin Lan City, he's been filled with hatred toward the demon race, to the point even Peak Lord Shen…"

Shen Qingqiu rubbed his nose and said indifferently, "It's fine."

Being disdained by a bald old donkey didn't matter much.

"Although," Master Wu Chen said, "he's gotten much better now. In the period Tianlang-Jun has been staying in Zhao Hua Monastery, he's never given him a hard time."

"Your honored monastery took Tianlang-Jun into custody?" asked Shen Qingqiu.

"Not really custody," said Master Wu Chen. "This one only wishes to freely discuss Buddhism with him while also helping to relieve the decay of the Dew Mushroom body. He'll stay for a couple years until he's stabilized, then he can go wherever. At that time, whether he wishes to continue wandering the Human Realm or prefers to take Zhuzhi-Lang's bones and return to the demon race will all be up to him. This one believes that there is no anger within him. Even if there had been once, it has since dispersed."

Master Wu Chen's legs had been destroyed by the sowers in Jin Lan City, and the sowers had been sent by Tianlang-Jun. Yet he hadn't taken this incident to heart at all. Shen Qingqiu's heart couldn't help but well with admiration. On top of that, the master's compassion was neither haphazard nor carelessly bestowed.

At their final goodbye, Shen Qingqiu had also felt that Tianlang-Jun no longer had any interest in destroying the world. From the start, it wasn't what he'd really wanted to do, or something he'd liked doing.

It was just, now that there was no Zhuzhi-Lang to foolishly follow him around and foot his bills, beat away miscellaneous soldiers, or collect interesting pocketbooks for him, it was probably inevitable that, at times, he'd feel sad.

Just like the Shen Qingqiu at present.

Zhao Hua Monastery’s monks left first and walked toward Qiong Ding Hall. But even though he was the sect leader, Yue Qingyuan didn’t go with them. Instead, he stood in place, silently staring at Shen Qingqiu. For some reason, it became comparatively more awkward.

As if testing the waters, Yue Qingyuan said, “Xiao-Jiu…”

“Shixiong,” said Shen Qingqiu, “it’s Qingqiu.”

Even though it would be too difficult to tell Yue Qingyuan the truth, Shen Qingqiu still hoped he could demonstrate the difference in other ways.

Yue Qingyuan was stunned for a bit, then gave a small smile. “It’s Qingqiu. Qingqiu-shidi.”

Shen Qingqiu looked at Xuan Su at his waist. He had yet to speak when Yue Qingyuan spontaneously said himself, “Shidi need not worry. After a few more months of secluded cultivation, all should be well for a time.”

“Then Zhangmen-shixiong must not impulsively draw his sword in the future,” said Shen Qingqiu. “One’s cultivation can be improved, more breakthroughs can always be achieved, but one’s life force can never be returned.”

Yue Qingyuan gently shook his head. “One’s life force is not the only thing that cannot be returned.”

The two of them walked slowly toward Qiong Ding Hall. Along the way, they heard the joyful laughter of young disciples and the bursts of fireworks overhead.

“What are your plans for the future?” asked Yue Qingyuan.

“I have no plans for the time being,” said Shen Qingqiu. “First I’ll wait for Luo Binghe to return and see how he’s doing.”

Yue Qingyuan smiled. “You truly adore that disciple.”

Shen Qingqiu was searching for a way to answer when Yue Qingyuan said, “Shidi, Cang Qiong Mountain will forever be a place to which you can return whenever you tire of wandering the outside world.”

These words were said with utmost sincerity and solemnity.

Yue Qingyuan had always been this way. Whatever he promised, he would definitely deliver. And what he couldn't deliver, he would endeavor to make up for, no matter the cost.

After assuming the role of this novel character, Shen Qingqiu had always refused to become the scum villain from the original work. He'd drawn a clear boundary between them and taken great pride in walking the opposite path. So never before had he felt such a powerful and impulsive thought:

If only he really were Shen Jiu.

If only that person could really hear these words.

Shen Qingqiu's steps became slower and slower, when suddenly, like he'd sensed something, he raised his head and looked into the distance. On the other side of the crowd, right before it, was Luo Binghe. He stood at the foot of the white stone steps leading to Qiong Ding Peak's main hall.

He stood utterly alone, without a single person beside him. When the people walking past saw his face, their own faces filled with all sorts of expressions. Shen Qingqiu involuntarily ran forward a couple of steps, then turned his head to look at the person behind him.

"Go on," said Yue Qingyuan. He stood behind Shen Qingqiu, silent and with good grace.

It was as if one was the past and the other the future.

One year, the demon race had not known what was good for itself and so had come to Qiong Ding Peak to provoke them with a show of strength. They'd spent a good chunk of time smashing, hitting, burning, and plundering, and had even smashed a bunch of floor tiles with a hammer.

Luo Binghe was staring at a crack between the white tiles on the ground when he heard the familiar snap of a fan opening. A pair of white shoes stepped onto that stone crack, which was already spotted with green moss. He abruptly raised his head.

Shen Qingqiu waved his fan. "Don't say a word. First, let this master ask you: As a disciple, why did you not respectfully wait for your Shizun to wake up, but instead go to run about the outside world?"

Luo Binghe forced down his excited expression, suppressing himself. “No one on Cang Qiong Mountain welcomes my presence, so I could only secretly come to check in from time to time. Just now I didn’t see Shizun in the Lingxi Caves, and I thought that they’d hidden Shizun away. Or that Shizun had left again…”

As Shen Qingqiu listened to this meek defense, he couldn’t help but remember what Shang Qinghua had just said.

If he hadn’t gone around pestering and harassing everyone and everything, perhaps Luo Binghe really would have darkened to the core and become the young man in the original work: someone who’d rend a person into a human stick with his bare hands, who cursed the world and himself. Although now instead he’d become a lovesick young man, so it wasn’t really that much better… But at least he’d gained some lovable qualities.

Or at least, Shen Qingqiu had finally realized that he was quite fond of them.

Shen Qingqiu sighed. “You knew you weren’t welcome, and you still dutifully sent me back to Cang Qiong Mountain?”

“I thought that when Shizun woke up, he would definitely prefer seeing Cang Qiong Mountain first…”

Without caring about his image, Shen Qingqiu broke character and smacked Luo Binghe’s forehead with his fan. Resentful of Luo Binghe’s actions, he said, “Of course what this master most wanted to see first was you!”

Luo Binghe had taken a thwack from a fan, but he was so excited that his entire face flushed red, his eyes becoming watery, like he wanted to speak but couldn’t. Shen Qingqiu’s entire body felt like it was going weak from his gaze.

Then suddenly sounds of yelling and the clang of blades rose around them.

Yang Yixuan stood on the eaves of Qiong Ding Peak’s main hall and shouted, “Sure enough, that demon ruffian came back to harass Shen-shibo!”

Hundreds of people responded to his call, and someone immediately shouted along with him, “That bastard still has the gall to show his face! Get your weapons! Where’s my weapon?”

“That’s my sword, Shixiong, give it back! If you want to fight, go back and get yours!”

No wonder Luo Binghe hadn’t hung around and waited for him to wake up. Merely showing his face on Cang Qiong Mountain had people screaming their intent to attack him. The warmth of his welcome was eminently clear.

“Ah, not bad, your judgment was correct,” Shen Qingqiu said helplessly. “Under these circumstances, sneaking in is indeed your only option.”

“I already said before that I wasn’t welcome here,” Luo Binghe said in a quiet voice.

Shen Qingqiu patted his head. “That’s fine. Shizun welcomes you.”

Qiong Ding Peak clamored with roars for violence, some genuine, some insincere, raring to have a go, just a bunch of people who craved nothing but havoc. In even greater numbers were the peaceful passersby, all turning a blind eye to the devil in human form that was Luo Binghe. Shen Qingqiu didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Why don’t we leave, then?” he asked.

For a moment, Luo Binghe couldn’t manage to react. “Leave?”

Shen Qingqiu nodded. “Didn’t you say that you weren’t welcome here? Then let’s leave and go somewhere that does welcome you.” He added, “This time, no matter where you wish to go, this master will accompany you.”

Luo Binghe’s face had always appeared very quick and clever, but now his expression was thoroughly dumbfounded because of these few words. It was hard to look at.

Other than Cang Qiong Mountain's disciples, Qiong Ding Peak was also packed with the cultivators from various sects who'd come to attend the celebration. On top of their senses being sharp, Shen Qingqiu had also deliberately refused to lower his voice, so of course everyone had heard him very clearly. As one, they all feigned ignorance. The ones who'd been watching the fireworks pointed and gestured at the sky, and the ones who'd been lightly chuckling now laughed loud enough to raise the roof.

They were being very cooperative, showing consideration for Cang Qiong Mountain's dignity, but Liu Qingge didn't appreciate this. He jumped down from the eaves and yelled at Shen Qingqiu, practically incoherent with rage. "Hey!"

Qi Qingqi was beside herself with anger. "I don't care anymore! Go wherever you like! Shen Qingqiu, you—both of you… Mingyan, let's go! What are you looking at?! What's there to see—is this your first time bearing witness to such shamelessness?!"

"Shimei, careful of the karma in your words. Mind the image of our respected Cang Qiong Mountain…"

Exactly what deep-set images did Cang Qiong Mountain have in the people's hearts outside of covering for the faults of their own, their Director of Demolitions, their intimacy with demons, and their master-disciple pair who'd starred in a famous porno? Shen Qingqiu considered this for a while and came up empty.

Initially, he'd been pulling Luo Binghe along by the hand. Who knew when it had become Luo Binghe pulling him along instead?

He felt those five fingers on the back of his hand slowly tighten, clamping down until it hurt. Luo Binghe gently raised his head, and the entire night sky with its river of stars sparkled within the depths of his pitch-black eyes. It was almost like, if he wasn't careful, some glittering treasures would fall from them.

Shen Qingqiu took all this in stride. Looking back on everything, his heart had transformed, becoming like that of an old monk on a pilgramage to retrieve scriptures. He'd suffered through eighty-one hardships[13] and, after much pain and struggle, finally produced the right result.

So let him cry. After all, Luo Binghe always behaved this way. A plot with so many up and downs and such intense chaos and disorder, to the point that it was constantly like being struck by lightning on a clear day… Honestly, Shen Qingqiu also wanted to burst into tears.

And with this peerlessly bizarre book’s complete and successful transformation, “Great Master” Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky’s career was now doubtlessly devoid of regrets, while the unparalleled ranting critic, Peerless Cucumber, could no longer say he disdained it the way he once had either.

The author wouldn’t fill in the plot holes, so this great one had been forced to take matters into his own hands. In the long river of history of great and mighty Zhongdian stallion novels, what reader had led the charge like him? Heartily coughing up blood while putting himself on the line to fill in plot holes, just to rescue the B-Points of a brainless power fantasy, a peerless marvel of a work that had the writing quality of a grade school essay!

Even though the direction had gone a bit awry during said rescue process, at least he’d really managed to achieve “YOU CAN YOU UP, NO CAN NO BB!”

The moment Shen Qingqiu had flipped open *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, the story had begun, but as he shut *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, the story had yet to end.

Or, perhaps, the story circulating through the world might already have ended.

But the story between you and me has only just begun.

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【 System Loading… 】

THIS STORY CONCLUDES IN

The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System

VOLUME 4

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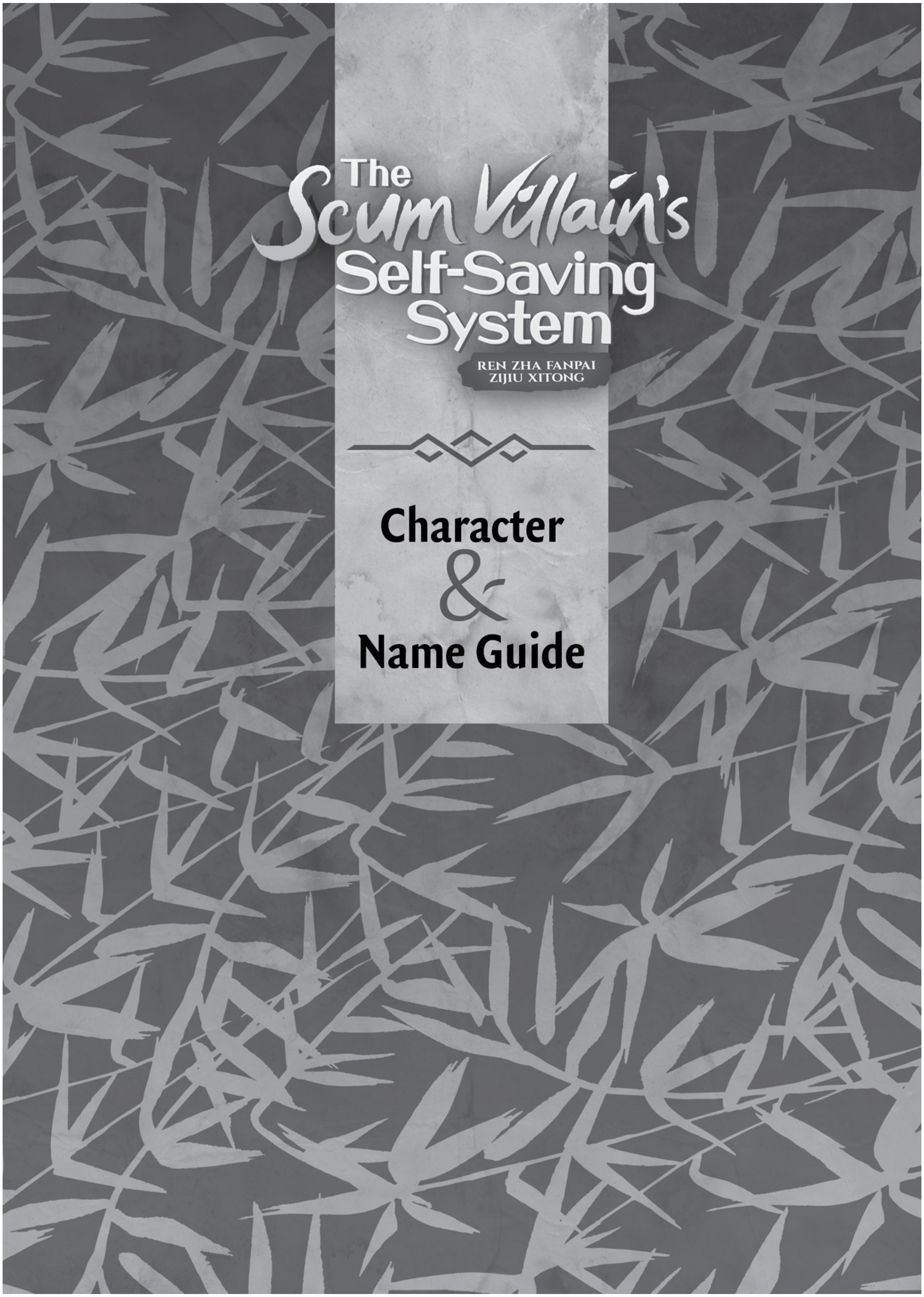

The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System

REN ZHA FANPAI
ZIJIU XITONG

Character & Name Guide

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference and should not be considered a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Shen Yuan (Shen Qingqiu)

SURNAME SHEN, "WALL"

TITLE: Peerless Cucumber (web handle)

RANK: *Proud Immortal Demon Way*'s Most Supportive Anti

Probably the most dedicated anti-fan of *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, Shen Yuan was baited by its cool monsters and charming protagonist to read millions and millions of words of the hit stallion novel, though he cussed out the author's sellout tendencies the whole way. After his untimely death during a fit of rage over the novel's ending, he was rewarded with a chance to enter the world of the story and fix it his own damn self.

However, all he's managed to do so far has been to "fix" the story into a right mess. Still reeling from the realization that he managed to make the stallion protagonist fall in love with the scum villain of all people, Shen Qingqiu has to decide how he's going to behave around a Luo Binghe who's made himself into his captor.

For all that Shen Qingqiu is terrified of what this furious and obsessive Luo Binghe could do, he did make this mess, and he figures that maybe he should get around to picking up the pieces. At the end of the day…can he really stand to hurt the little white lotus he raised?

Luo Binghe

SURNAME LUO FOR THE LUO RIVER, “ICY RIVER”

RANK: White Lotus Disciple (Qing Jing Peak)

SWORD (CURRENT): Zheng Yang (/ “Righteous sun”)

SWORD (FUTURE): Xin Mo (/ “Heart demon”)

As the protagonist of *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, the original Luo Binghe rose from humble origins to reign as tyrant over the three realms, his innumerable harem at his beck and call. Perhaps betrayal was written into his fate, as even in this story, where the transmigrated Shen Qingqiu gave him three halcyon years of love and acknowledgment, he was still cast into the Endless Abyss by those same beloved hands.

But that’s okay. Luo Binghe gets what he wants…and now he’s finally strong enough to keep the one he cares for within his grasp. So what if he had to threaten Shen Qingqiu’s beloved sect to stop him from running? It’s not as if his shizun’s opinion of him could get any worse.

The runaway plot, however, has other plans. As events and Luo Binghe’s fragile maiden heart [??] spiral further out of control in a world no longer designed for his domination, what will it take to save them all?

CANG QIONG MOUNTAIN SECT MEMBERS

Shen Qingqiu

SURNAME SHEN, “CLEAR AUTUMN”

TITLE: Xiu Ya Sword (/ “Elegant and refined”)

RANK: Peak Lord (Qing Jing Peak)

Shen Qingqiu, the refined and elegant peak lord of the peak of scholars, was also the scum villain who seemingly made it his life’s mission to make Luo Binghe’s life miserable in the original *Proud Immortal Demon Way*. However, the scum villain’s original awfulness may in fact be rooted in unspoken history.

In terms of humble origins, it seems he had more reasons to relate to Luo Binghe than to look down on him… Not that this stopped him from settling on resentment instead. However, these hidden truths are now no more than faded memories.

Yue Qingyuan

SURNAME YUE, “CLEAR SOURCE”

TITLE: Xuan Su Sword (/ “Dark and solemn”)

RANK: Sect Leader, Peak Lord (Qiong Ding Peak)

As sect leader of the foremost major cultivation sect, Yue Qingyuan normally lives up to his responsibilities as a levelheaded leader and respected authority. But when his shidi Shen Qingqiu is the one asking for a favor, he can never deny the man anything.

Though the transmigrated Shen Qingqiu admires Yue Qingyuan more than anyone, he realizes he is no longer the intended recipient of this favor. The System may guide Shen Qingqiu to bring the truth behind this bond to light, but Yue Qingyuan will have to find his own closure, as the person he looks for behind the new Shen Qingqiu’s eyes will no longer return.

Ning Yingying

SURNAME NING, “INFANT”

RANK: Youngest Female Disciple (Qing Jing Peak)

Luo Binghe’s shijie and childhood friend. In the original *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, she was the first maiden to be accepted into Luo Binghe's harem after she helped him confront his inner demons. As the world evolves away from the constraints of the stallion genre, Ning Yingying has grown up into a fine young woman who cares deeply for her peak and her shizun, and she is more than capable of showing some spine in a crisis.

Ming Fan

SURNAME MING, “SAIL”

RANK: Most Senior Disciple (Qing Jing Peak)

One of Luo Binghe’s tormentors in *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, Ming Fan was a loyal lackey and co-conspirator to the original Shen Qingqiu. But aside from his worrying habits of antagonizing the protagonist, the transmigrated Shen Qingqiu finds him to be a promising young man who doesn’t let his spoiled upbringing interfere with his respect for his master. Ming Fan helps keep the peak running in the wake of Luo Binghe’s unfortunate departure, and he does his best to live up to his master’s teachings.

Liu Qingge

SURNAME LIU, “CLEAR SONG”

RANK: Peak Lord (Bai Zhan Peak)

SWORD: Cheng Luan (/ “Soaring phoenix”)

Despite being a character who never made an official appearance in *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, Master Liu had a legion of fanboys for his legendarily unparalleled skill in battle. After the transmigrated Shen Qingqiu saved him from a lethal qi deviation, his opinion of his distasteful shixiong took a one-eighty, and he will now go to drastic lengths to fight for his shixiong's honor. What moving camaraderie between good martial brothers, right?

Yang Yixuan

SURNAME YANG, "ONE MYSTERIOUS"

RANK: Disciple (Bai Zhan Peak)

The son of a weapons shop owner from the plague-ridden Jin Lan City, Yang Yixuan is an energetic young man who inherited his father's courage. After encountering (and being solidly defeated by) the Cang Qiong peak lords on their rescue mission, he manages to convince Liu Qingge to make an exception and take him as a disciple.

Mu Qingfang

SURNAME MU, "CLEAR FRAGRANCE"

RANK: Peak Lord (Qian Cao Peak)

A master of the healing arts, who feels a sense of responsibility for the well-being of his sectmates. His skills continue to be instrumental in solving medical dilemmas large and small, though even the most skillful healer has their limits.

Qi Qingqi

SURNAME QI, "CLEAR AND LUSH"

RANK: Peak Lord (Xian Shu Peak)

A woman with a straightforward and fierce temperament; a sectmate the transmigrated Shen Qingqiu gets along with well in his new world. Though she won't hesitate to speak her mind, she cares deeply for her sect.

Liu Mingyan

SURNAME LIU, "DRIZZLING MIST"

RANK: Disciple (Xian Shu Peak)

SWORD: Shui Se (/ “Color of water”)

The number one true female lead of *Proud Immortal Demon Way* and younger sister of Liu Qingge. Because of her peerless beauty, Liu Mingyan typically wears a veil to hide her face. She never loses her courage and poise as she grows into her own, and as an adult, she has begun to go out on her own adventures of all kinds.

Shang Qinghua

SURNAME SHANG, “CLEAR AND SPLENDID”

TITLE: Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky

(web handle, / “beating your airplane at the sky”)

RANK: Peak Lord (An Ding Peak)

Overworked and underpaid, the Peak Lord of An Ding Peak takes on a thankless job as the head of the sect’s “housekeeping” department. Shen Qingqiu’s fellow transmigrator may be rather shifty and unreliable, but sometimes a friend from the same “hometown” is just what he needs.

DEMONS

Many demons go by titles instead of personal names. Titles styled like XX-Jun are for high-ranking demon nobility, and some titles may be hereditary.

Tianlang-Jun

"HEAVEN'S GEMSTONE," TITLE -JUN

RANK: Saintly Ruler (former)

Luo Binghe's birth father, a heavenly demon. Once sealed beneath a great mountain by the righteous sects, he is now free and raring to lash out against those who betrayed him. This pure-blooded demon lord, once slated to be the final boss of the original novel before being edited out for being too OP, is no simple foe. But is revenge truly what his heart desires?

Zhuzhi-Lang

"BAMBOO BRANCH," TITLE -LANG

RANK: Tianlang-Jun's Trusted Right Hand

Tianlang-Jun's nephew and subordinate, born to heavenly demon and snake demon parents. Sincere and straightforward, he is willing to repay anyone who shows him favor a hundred times over—including Shen Qingqiu, who spared him when he was still lurking as a snake-man in Bai Lu Forest. However, Zhuzhi-Lang is perhaps not the best at determining what repayment his benefactor would like to receive.

Sha Hualing

"GAUZE," "SPLENDID BELL"

RANK: Demon Saintess

A crafty and vicious pure-blooded demon who is eager to earn Luo Binghe's favor. However, her current role as an overworked and underpaid employee seems something of a downgrade from her original counterpart’s status as a tyrannical member of Luo Binghe’s harem.

Meng Mo

“DREAM DEMON”

RANK: Luo Binghe’s Teacher in Demonic Techniques

Once a legendary master of dream manipulation, Meng Mo is now Luo Binghe’s underappreciated “Portable Grandfather.” Oh, the things a teacher will suffer to pass on his techniques.

Mobei-Jun

“DESERTED NORTH,” TITLE -JUN

RANK: Demonic Second-Gen

Luo Binghe’s eccentric sidekick. A proud ice demon turned plot device for Luo Binghe’s plot-dictated power-up arc, as well as Shang Qinghua’s demonic employer.

OTHER SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Old Palace Master

RANK: Palace Master (Huan Hua Palace)

The master of Luo Binghe’s birth mother. When he saw Luo Binghe for the first time, he seemed to recognize the shades of someone familiar in the young disciple’s face. Off in “traveling seclusion,” if Luo Binghe’s word is to be trusted about his whereabouts.

Su Xiyan

SURNAME SU, “MOONFLOWER”

RANK: Former Head Disciple (Huan Hua Palace)

Luo Binghe's birth mother. A mysterious woman who was originally slated to succeed the Old Palace Master of Huan Hua Palace, but somehow became involved with Tianlang-Jun. Sometime around Tianlang-Jun’s sealing, she was said to have left her sect due to her relations with a demon. Set a newborn Luo Binghe adrift on the Luo River, then shortly after passed away.

Gongyi Xiao

SURNAME GONGYI, “MUGWORT”

RANK: Head Disciple (Huan Hua Palace)

The former favorite of both the Old Palace Master and his daughter, Gongyi Xiao’s star began to fall when the protagonist waltzed onto the scene. An earnest and honorable young man who is willing to disobey orders to do the right thing, he met an unfortunate end soon after assisting with Shen Qingqiu’s Water Prison escape…

Qiu Haitang

SURNAME QIU, “CHINESE FLOWERING APPLE,”

FULL NAME TRANSLATES TO “BEGONIA”

RANK: Hall Master (some random sect)

The once pampered daughter of the wealthy Qiu family. Originally the most powerful family within their city, they met their end in a brutal massacre many years ago at the hands of none other than her own fiancé, the original Shen Qingqiu. Filled with great loathing, the moment she finds out he’s still alive, she will stop at nothing to hunt him down…

Wu Chen

SURNAME WU, “WITHOUT DUST”

RANK: Abbot (Zhao Hua Monastery)

One of the brave volunteers to foray into a plague-ridden Jin Lan City, Master Wu Chen has since recovered and continues his role as one of the leaders of Zhao Hua Monastery.

Wu Wang

SURNAME WU, “WITHOUT DUST”

RANK: Abbot (Zhao Hua Monastery)

The chief leader of Zhao Hua Monastery and Master Wu Chen’s shixiong. Unlike his kind and gentle shidi, this “bald donkey,” as Shen Qingqiu affectionately calls him, is full of resentment and paranoia toward the demon race.

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Locations

CANG QIONG MOUNTAIN

Cang Qiong Mountain Sect

“BLUE HEAVENS” MOUNTAIN SECT

Located in the east, Cang Qiong Mountain Sect is the world’s foremost major cultivation sect. The mountain has twelve individual peaks that act as branches with their own specialties and traditions, each run by their own peak lord and united under the leadership of Qiong Ding Peak. Rainbow Bridges physically connect the peaks to allow easy travel.

The peaks are ranked in a hierarchy, and disciples of lower-ranked peaks call same-generation disciples of higher-ranked peaks Shixiong or Shijie regardless of their actual order of entry into the sect, though seniority within a given peak is still determined by order of entry. Disciples are separated into inner (“inside the gate”) and outer (“outside the gate”) rankings, with inner disciples being higher-ranked members of the sect.

Qiong Ding Peak

“HEAVEN’S APEX” PEAK

The peak of the sect’s leadership; the Peak Lord of Qiong Ding Peak is also the leader of the entire Cang Qiong Mountain Sect.

Qing Jing Peak

“CLEAR AND TRANQUIL” PEAK

The peak of scholars, artists, and musicians.

An Ding Peak

“STABLE AND SETTLED” PEAK

The peak in charge of sect logistics, including stock transportation and repair of damages.

Bai Zhan Peak

“HUNDRED BATTLES” PEAK

The peak of martial artists.

Qian Cao Peak

“THOUSAND GRASSES” PEAK

The peak of medicine and healing.

Xian Shu Peak

“IMMORTAL BEAUTY” PEAK

An all-female peak.

Wan Jian Peak

“TEN THOUSAND SWORDS” PEAK

The peak of sword masters.

Ku Xing Peak

“ASCETIC PRACTICE” PEAK

The peak of ascetic cultivation.

OTHER CULTIVATION SECTS

Huan Hua Palace

“ILLUSORY FLOWER” PALACE

Located in the south, Huan Hua Palace disciples practice a number of different cultivation schools but specialize in illusions, mazes, and concealment. They are the richest of the sects and provide the most funding to every Immortal Alliance Conference. The Water Prison located beneath their foundations is used to hold the most notorious criminals of the cultivation world before trial.

Tian Yi Temple

“UNITED WITH HEAVEN” TEMPLE

Located in the central territories, the priests of Tian Yi Temple practice Daoist cultivation.

Zhao Hua Monastery

“BRIGHT AND SPLENDID” MONASTERY

Located in the east, the monks of Zhao Hua Monastery practice Buddhist cultivation.

MISCELLANEOUS LOCATIONS

Bai Lu Forest

“WHITE DEW” FOREST

A forest on the edge of Huan Hua Palace’s territory where the Sun-Moon Dew Mushroom can be found. Located on Bai Lu Mountain, under which Tianlang-Jun was once sealed.

The Borderlands

Areas where the barrier between the Human and Demon Realms is thin and it’s possible to pass between them without crossing the Endless Abyss. Because this prompts frequent raids from the more opportunistic members of the demon race, the borderlands are sparsely settled by humans, with only a few garrisons of cultivators remaining as guards.

The Endless Abyss

The boundary between the Human and Demon Realms; the hellish location of Luo Binghe’s five-year training arc before he reemerges as the overpowered protagonist.

The Holy Mausoleum

A restricted area within the Demon Realm where supreme rulers are entombed after their deaths. Filled with traps and treacherous creatures to deter any would-be tomb raiders from making off with the treasures within.

Hua Yue City

“FLOWER MOON” CITY

A city near Huan Hua Palace, located in a prosperous and densely populated area of the central plains. The city in which Shen Qingqiu self-detonated after escaping Huan Hua Palace's Water Prison.

Jin Lan City

"GOLDEN ORCHID" CITY

Once a prosperous trade center at the intersection of two great rivers, Jin Lan City found itself suffering from a mysterious plague. Its name, "golden orchid," is often used as a metaphor for "sworn brotherhood."

Jue Di Gorge

"HOPELESS LAND" GORGE

A mountainous region with all sorts of treacherous terrain, perfect for adventure.

Mai Gu Ridge

"BURIED BONE" RIDGE

An ominous mountain ridge within the Demon Realm that houses a complex network of caverns and is shaped menacingly like a skull. Numerous demonic creatures are said to make their home there.

The Underground Palace

Luo Binghe's home base in the Demon Realm. It contains a replica of Shen Qingqiu's Bamboo House from Qing Jing Peak.

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Name Guide
Names, Honorifics, & Titles

Courtesy Names

A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's birth name was reserved for only elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media; as such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

It was a tradition throughout some parts of Chinese history for all children of a family within a certain generation to have given names with the same first or last character. This "generation name" may be taken from a certain poem, with successive generations using successive characters from the poem. In *Scum Villain*, this tradition is used to give the peak lords their courtesy names, so all peak lords of Shen Qingqiu's generation have courtesy names starting with Qing.

Diminutives and Nicknames

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

EXAMPLE: Xiao-shimei (the nickname Ming Fan uses for Ning Yingying)

DA-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

EXAMPLE: Da-shixiong (how Ning Yingying addresses Ming Fan)

-ER: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

EXAMPLE: Ling-er (how Sha Hualing refers to herself when she is trying to be cute)

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

EXAMPLE: A-Luo (the nickname Ning Yingying uses for Luo Binghe)

-GE/-GEGE: A word meaning "big brother." When added as a suffix, it becomes an affectionate address for any older male the user is close to, with the -gege variant being cutesier and more often used by young girls. Can also be used by itself to refer to one's true older brother.

EXAMPLE: Qi-ge (what a young Shen Jiu calls his childhood friend)

Formal

-JUN: A suffix meaning "lord."

-XIANSHENG: A respectful suffix with several uses, including for someone with a great deal of expertise in their profession or a teacher.

Cultivation and Martial Arts

ZHANGMEN: Leader of a cultivation/martial arts sect.

SHIZUN: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address.

SHIFU: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender neutral. Mostly interchangeable with Shizun.

SHINIANG: The wife of a shifu/shizun.

SHIXIONG: Senior martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect.

SHIJIE: Senior martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

SHIDI: Junior martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

SHIMEI: Junior martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

SHISHU: The junior martial sibling of one's master. Can be male or female.

SHIBO: The senior martial sibling of one's master. Can be male or female.

SHIZHI: The disciple of one's martial sibling.

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Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of China. It is a tonal language, so correct pronunciation is vital to being understood! As many readers may not be familiar with the use and sound of tonal marks, below is a very simplified guide on the pronunciation of select character names and terms from MXTX's series to help get you started.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com.

Series Names

SCUM VILLAIN'S SELF-SAVING SYSTEM (RÉN ZHĀ FAˇN PÀI ZÌ JIÙ XÌ TOˇNG):

ren jaa faan pie zzh zioh she tone

GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION (MÓ DÀO ZUˇ SHĪ):

mwuh dow zoo shrr

HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING (TIĀN GUĀN CÌ FÚ):

tee-yan gwen tsz fuu

Character Names

SHĚN QĪNGQIŪ: Shhen Ching-cheeoh

LUÒ BĪNGHÉ: Loo-uh Bing-huhh

WÈI WÚXIÀN: Way Woo-shee-ahn

LÁN WÀNGJĪ: Lahn Wong-gee

XIÈ LIÁN: Shee-yay Lee-yan

HUĀ CHÉNG: Hoo-wah Cch-yung

XIAˇO-: shee-ow

-ER: ahrr

A-: ah

GŌNGZIˇ: gong-zzh
DÀOZHAˇNG: dow-jon
-JŪN: june
DÌDÌ: dee-dee
GĒGĒ: guh-guh
JIĚJIĚ: gee-ay-gee-ay
MÈIMEI: may-may
-XIÓNG: shong

Terms

DĀNMĚI: dann-may
WUˇXIÁ: woo-sheeah
XIĀNXIÁ: sheeyan-sheeah
QÌ: chee

General Consonants & Vowels

X: similar to English sh (**sh**eep)
Q: similar to English ch (**ch**arm)
C: similar to English ts (pan**ts**)
IU: yoh
UO: wuh
ZHI: jrr
CHI: chrr
SHI: shrr
RI: rrr
ZI: zzz
CI: tsz

SI: SSZ

U: When u follows a y, j, q, or x, the sound is actually ü, pronounced like eee with your lips rounded like ooo. This applies for yu, yuan, jun, etc.

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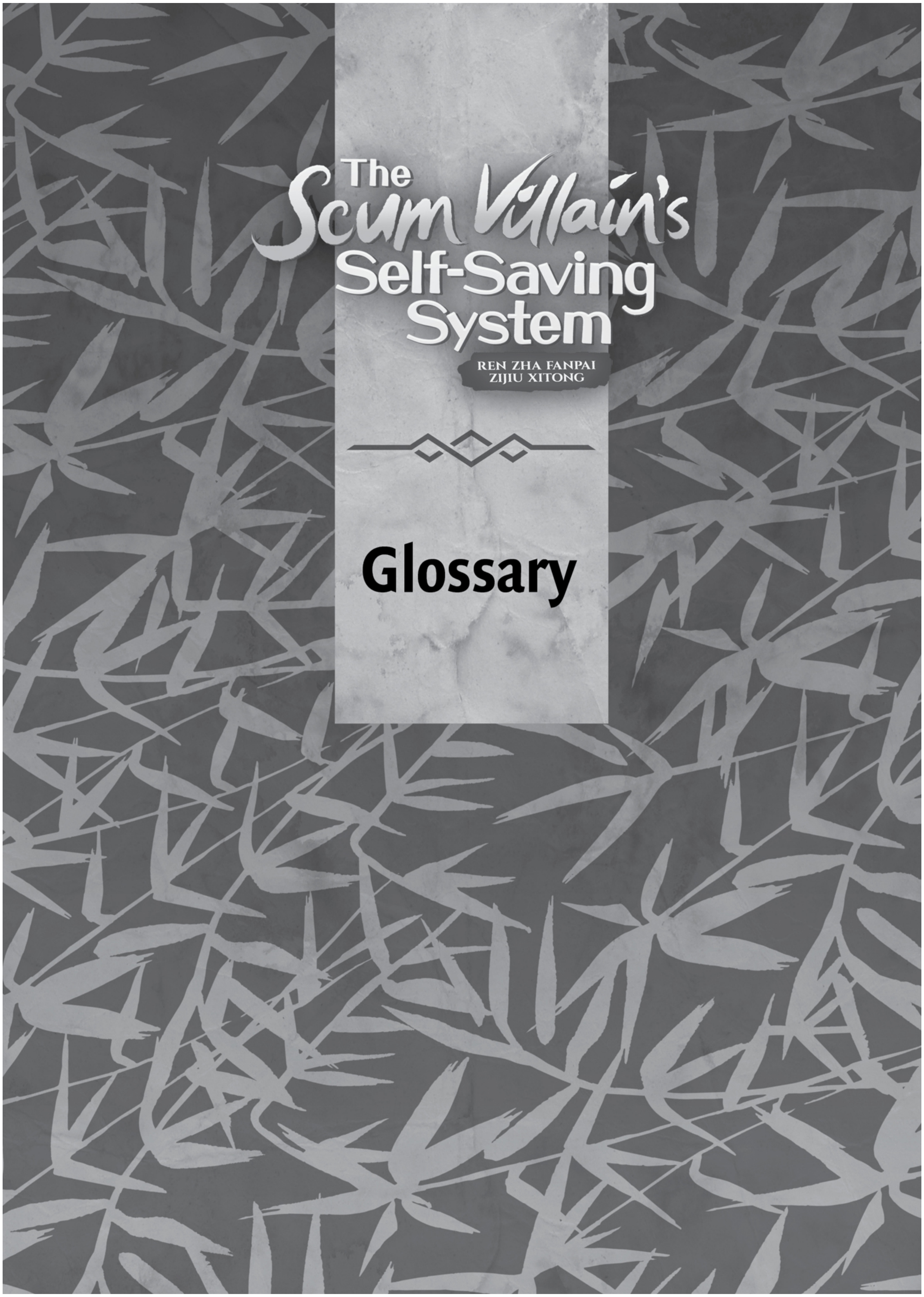

The Scum Villain's
Self-Saving
System

REN ZHA FANPAI
ZIJIU XITONG

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

China is home to dozens of cultures, and its history spans thousands of years. The provided definitions are not strictly universal across all these cultural groups, and this simplified overview is meant for new readers unfamiliar with the concepts. This glossary should not be considered a definitive source, especially for more complex ideas.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (/ “indulgence in beauty”) is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys’ love) genre in Japanese media. The majority of well-known danmei writers are women writing for women, although all genders produce and enjoy the genre.

Wuxia

Wuxia (/ “martial heroes”) is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues, who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and not—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the governing law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (/ “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their life span or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story’s central focus, it is not xianxia. *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing* are all considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Webnovels

Webnovels are novels serialized by chapter online, and the websites that host them are considered spaces for indie and amateur writers. Many novels, dramas, comics, and animated shows produced in China are based on popular webnovels.

Examples of popular webnovel websites in China include Jinjiang Literature City (jjwxc.net), Changpei Literature (gongzicp.com), and Qidian Chinese Net (qidian.com). While all of Mo Xiang Tong Xiu’s existing works and the majority of best-known danmei are initially published via JJWXC, *Scum Villain*’s series-within-a-series, *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, was said to be published on a “Zhongdian Literature” website, which is likely intended as a parody of Qidian Chinese Net, known for hosting male-targeted novels.

Webnovels have become somewhat infamous for being extremely long as authors will often keep them going for as long as paying subscribers are there. Readers typically purchase these stories chapter-by-chapter, and a certain number of subscribers is often required to allow for monetization. Other factors affecting an author’s earnings include word count which can lead to bloated chapters and run-on plots. While not all webnovels suffer from any of these things, it is something commonly expected due to the system within which they’re published.

Like all forms of media, very passionate fanbases often arise for webnovels. While the majority of readers are respectful, there is often a more toxic side of the community that is exacerbated by the parasocial relationship that some readers develop with the author as they follow serialized webnovels. Authors will often suffer backlash from these fans for things such as a plot or character decision some don't agree with, events readers find too shocking (often referred to as landmines), writing outside their expected genres or tropes, openly disagreeing with another creator, abruptly pausing or ending a story, posting a chapter late, or even simply posting something on their social media accounts that their fans do not like. Fan toxicity can be a huge problem for web novel authors who are reliant on subscriber support to make a living. This abuse can follow them across platforms, and often the only way to escape it is to stay off public social media altogether, which is a decision often made by the most popular of writers.

In *Scum Villain*, Shen Yuan could be considered one of these toxic fans due to his scathing commentary against the author of *Proud Immortal Demon Way*. However he did seem to stop at criticism towards the story itself and continued to pay for all the content he consumed, making him a lesser evil.

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TERMINOLOGY

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array's associated spell(s).

BLOOD MITES: Called blood gu ( ) in the original text, these parasitic insectile creatures that Luo Binghe fashions from his own blood are reminiscent of a curse in traditional Chinese witchcraft. According to legend, gu are created by sealing poisonous animals (often insects) inside a container and letting them devour one another. The resulting gu must be ingested by a target, after which the gu can be controlled remotely to harm or kill the host.

BOWING: As is seen in other Asian cultures, standing bows are a traditional greeting and are also used when giving an apology. A deeper bow shows greater respect.

BUDDHISM: The central belief of Buddhism is that life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth, only to be escaped by reaching enlightenment (nirvana). Buddhists believe in karma, that a person's actions will influence their fortune in this life and future lives. The teachings of the Buddha are known as The Middle Way and emphasize a practice that is neither extreme asceticism nor extreme indulgence.

CHINESE CALENDAR: The Chinese calendar uses the *Tian Gan Di Zhi* (Heavenly Stems, Earthly Branches) system, rather than numbers, to mark the years. There are ten heavenly stems (original meanings lost) and twelve earthly branches (associated with the zodiac), each represented by a written character. Each stem and branch is associated with either yin or yang, and one of the elemental properties: wood, earth, fire, metal, and water. The stems and branches are combined in cyclical patterns to create a calendar where every unit of time is associated with certain attributes.

This is what a character is asking for when inquiring for the date/time of birth (/ “eight characters of birth date/time”). Analyzing the stem/branch characters and their elemental associations was considered essential information in divination, fortune-telling, matchmaking, and even business deals.

CHRYSANTHEMUM: A flower that is a symbol of health and vitality. In sex scenes, specifically for two men, it’s used as symbolism for their backdoor entrance.

CHUUNIBYOU: From Japanese, literally meaning “middle school second-year disease.” Describes people who are “edgy” or have delusions of grandeur. Used as a loanword in Chinese.

CLINGING TO THIGHS: Similar to “riding someone’s coattails” in English. It implies an element of sucking up to someone, though some characters aren't above literally clinging to another's thighs.

Colors:

WHITE: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both the deceased and mourners.

BLACK: Represents the Heavens and the dao.

RED: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

YELLOW/GOLD: Wealth and prosperity, and often reserved for the emperor.

BLUE/GREEN (CYAN): Health, prosperity, and harmony.

PURPLE: Divinity and immortality, often associated with nobility.

CONCUBINES: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to possess women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

CONFUCIANISM: Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius placed heavy importance on respect for one’s elders and family, a concept broadly known as *xiao* (/ “filial piety”). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student towards a teacher, or people of a country towards their ruler.

CORES/GOLDEN CORES: The formation of a jindan (/ “golden core”) is a key step in any cultivator’s journey to immortality. The Golden Core forms within the lower dantian, becoming an internal source of power for the cultivator. Golden Core formation is only accomplished after a great deal of intense training and qi cultivation.

Cultivators can detonate their Golden Core as a last-ditch move to take out a dangerous opponent, but this almost always kills the cultivator. A core’s destruction or removal is permanent. In almost all instances, it cannot be re-cultivated. Its destruction also prevents the individual from ever being able to process or cultivate qi normally again.

COUGHING/SPITTING BLOOD: A way to show a character is ill, injured, or upset. Despite the very physical nature of the response, it does not necessarily mean that a character has been wounded; their body could simply be reacting to a very strong emotion. *(See also Seven Apertures/Qiqiao.)*

COURTESY NAMES: In addition to their birth name, an individual may receive a courtesy name when they come of age or on another special occasion. *(See Name Guide for more information.)*

CULTIVATORS/CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial artis who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while attaining personal strength and extending their life span.

Cultivation is a long process marked by “stages.” There are traditionally nine stages, but this is often simplified in fiction. Some common stages are noted below, though exact definitions of each stage may depend on the setting.

◇ Qi Condensation/Qi Refining (/)
◇ Foundation Establishment ( )
◇ Core Formation/Golden Core (/)
◇ Nascent Soul ( )
◇ Deity Transformation ( )
◇ Great Ascension ( )
◇ Heavenly Tribulation ( )

CULTIVATION MANUAL: Cultivation manuals and sutras are common plot devices in xianxia/wuxia novels. They provide detailed instructions on a secret or advanced training technique and are sought out by those who wish to advance their cultivation levels.

CURRENCY: The currency system during most dynasties was based on the exchange of silver and gold coinage. Weight was also used to measure denominations of money. An example is “one liang of silver.”

CUT-SLEEVE: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor’s love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

DANTIAN: *Dantian* (/ “cinnabar field”) refers to three regions in the body where qi is concentrated and refined. The Lower is located three finger widths below and two finger widths behind the navel. This is where a cultivator’s golden core would be formed and is where the qi metabolism process begins and progresses upward. The Middle is located at the center of the chest, at level with the heart, while the Upper is located on the forehead, between the eyebrows.

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the *dao* (/ “the way”). Following the dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a “true human,” safe from external harm and who can affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist superstitions.

DEMONS: A race of immensely powerful and innately supernatural beings. They are almost always aligned with evil.

DISCIPLES: Clan and sect members are known as disciples. Disciples live on sect grounds and have a strict hierarchy based on skill and seniority. They are divided into **Core**, **Inner**, and **Outer** rankings, with Core being the highest. Higher-ranked disciples get better lodging and other resources.

When formally joining a sect or clan as a disciple or a student, the sect/clan becomes like the disciple’s new family: teachers are parents and peers are siblings. Because of this, a betrayal or abandonment of one’s sect/clan is considered a deep transgression of Confucian values of filial piety. This is also the origin of many of the honorifics and titles used for martial arts.

DRAGON: Great chimeric beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

DUAL CULTIVATION: A cultivation method done in pairs. It is seen as a means by which both parties can advance their skills or even cure illness or curses by combining their qi. It is often sexual in nature or an outright euphemism for sex.

FACE: *Mianzi* ( ), generally translated as “face”, is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation, and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly or shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

FENG SHUI: *Feng shui* (/ “wind-water”) is a Daoist practice centered around the philosophy of achieving spiritual accord between people, objects, and the universe at large. Practitioners usually focus on positioning and orientation, believing this can optimize the flow of qi in their environment. Having good feng shui means being in harmony with the natural order.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: Also known as the *wuxing* (/ “Five Phases”). Rather than Western concepts of elemental magic, Chinese phases are more commonly used to describe the interactions and relationships between things. The phases can both beget and overcome each other.

◇ Wood (/ mu)
◇ Fire (/ huo)
◇ Earth (/ tu)
◇ Metal (/ jin)
◇ Water (/ shui)

FOUNDATION ESTABLISHMENT: An early cultivation stage achieved after collecting a certain amount of qi.

THE FOUR SCHOLARLY ARTS: The four academic and artistic talents required of a scholarly gentleman in ancient China. The Four Scholarly Arts were: Qin (the zither instrument *guqin*), Qi (a strategy game also known as *weiqi* or *go*), Calligraphy, and Painting.

GOLDEN FINGER: A protagonist-exclusive overpowered ability or weapon. This can also refer to them being generally OP ("over-powered") and not a specific ability or physical item.

GUANYIN: Also known as a bodhisattva, this is a Buddhist term whose exact definition differs depending on the branch of Buddhism being discussed. Its original Sanskrit translates to “one whose goal is awakening.” Depending on the branch of Buddhism, it can refer to (among other things) one who is on the path to becoming a buddha, or to one who has actually achieved enlightenment and has declined entry to nirvana in favor of returning to show others the way.

GUQIN: A seven-stringed zither, played by plucking with the fingers. Sometimes called a qin. It is fairly large and is meant to be laid flat on a surface or on one’s lap while playing.

HAND SEALS: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells, or used while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

HUMAN STICK: An ancient Chinese torture and execution method where all four limbs are chopped off. The related "human swine" goes a step further: on top of losing their limbs, the victim has their face and scalp mutilated, is rendered mute and blind, then thrown into a pigsty or chamberpot.

IMMORTALS AND IMMORTALITY: Immortals have transcended mortality through cultivation. They possess long lives, are immune to illness and aging, and have various magical powers. The exact life span of immortals differs from story to story, and in some they only live for three to four hundred years.

IMMORTAL-BINDING ROPES OR CABLES: Ropes, nets, and other restraints enchanted to withstand the power of an immortal or god. They can only be cut by high-powered spiritual items or weapons and often limit the abilities of those trapped by them.

INCENSE TIME: A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes. “One incense time” is roughly thirty minutes.

INEDIA: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting both decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might cause Westerners to think of green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite). This is the color referenced when a person’s skin is described as “the color of jade.”

JIANGHU: A staple of wuxia, the *jianghu* (/ “rivers and lakes”) describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, and artisans and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

JINJIANG: Also known as the “green Jinjiang,” due to the color of the site. At time of publication, Mo Xiang Tong Xiu’s first three novels are serialized here, and it generally hosts content oriented toward female audiences. *(See Genres > Webnovels for more information.)*

KOWTOW: The *kowtow* (/ “knock head”) is an act of prostration where one kneels and bows low enough that their forehead touches the ground. A show of deep respect and reverence that can also be used to beg, plead, or show sincerity.

LILY: A flower considered a symbol of long-lasting love, making it a popular flower at weddings.

LOTUS: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

NASCENT SOUL: A cultivation stage in which cultivators can project their souls outside their bodies and have them travel independently. This can allow them to survive the death of their physical body and advance to a higher state.

NIGHT PEARLS: Night pearls are a variety of rare fluorescent stones. Their fluorescence derives from rare trace elements in igneous rock or crystalized fluorite. A valued gem in China often used in fiction as natural, travel-sized sources of light that don’t require fire or qi.

NPC: Shortened for "Non-Player Character". An individual in a game who is not controlled by a player and instead a background character intended to fill out and advance the story.

Numbers

TWO: Two (/ “er”) is considered a good number and is referenced in the common idiom “good things come in pairs.” It is common practice to repeat characters in pairs for added effect.

THREE: Three (/ “san”) sounds like sheng (/ “living”) and also like san (/ “separation”).

FOUR: Four (/ “si”) sounds like si (/ “death”). A very unlucky number.

SEVEN: Seven (/ “qi”) sounds like qi (/ “together”), making it a good number for love-related things. However, it also sounds like qi (/ “deception”).

EIGHT: Eight (/ “ba”) sounds like fa (/ “prosperity”), causing it to be considered a very lucky number.

NINE: Nine (/ “jiu”) is associated with matters surrounding the Emperor and Heaven, and is as such considered an auspicious number.

MXTX’s work has subtle numerical theming around its love interests. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, her second book, Lan Wangji is frequently called Lan-er-gege (“second brother Lan”) as a nickname by Wei Wuxian. In her third book, *Heaven Official’s Blessing*, Hua Cheng is the third son of his family and gives the name San Lang (“third youth”) when Xie Lian asks what to call him.

OTAKU: Anime fandom slang for individuals who are deeply obsessed with a specific niche hobby, e.g., anime. Generically, refers to those fixated on anime.

PAPER TALISMANS: Strips of paper with incantations written on them, often done so with cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells. Distinct from talisman charms, which are powerful magical objects capable of subduing or killing monsters.

PEACHES: Peaches are associated with long life and immortality. For this reason, peaches and peach-shaped things are commonly eaten to celebrate birthdays. Peaches are also an ancient symbol of love between men, coming from a story where a duke took a bite from a very sweet peach and gave the rest of it to his lover to enjoy.

PEARLS: Pearls are associated with wisdom and prosperity. They are also connected to dragons; many depictions show them clutching a pearl or chasing after a pearl.

PEONY: Symbolizes wealth and power; was considered the emperor of flowers.

PHOENIX: *Fenghuang* (/ “phoenix”), a legendary chimeric bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the Empress, and happy marriages.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these things are usually delivered in pill form. These pills are created in special kilns.

PINE TREE: A symbol of evergreen sentiment or everlasting affection.

QI: *Qi* ( ) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

QI CIRCULATION: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact and can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

QI DEVIATION: A qi deviation (/ “to catch fire and enter demonhood”) occurs when one’s cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or “heart demons” ( ).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms such as leaping to one’s death to escape a hallucination. Common treatments of qi deviation in fiction include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

QILIN: A one-horned chimera said to appear extremely rarely. Commonly associated with the birth or death of a great ruler or sage.

REALGAR: An orange-red mineral in crystal form also known as “ruby sulphur” or “ruby of arsenic.” In traditional Chinese medicine, realgar is used as an antidote to poison, as well as to repel snakes and insects. Realgar wine—realgar powder mixed with baijiu or yellow wine—is traditionally consumed during the Dragon Boat Festival.

SECOND-GENERATION RICH KID: A child of a wealthy family who grows up with a large inheritance. “Second-generation” in this case refers to them being the younger generation (as opposed to their parents, who are the first generation) rather than immigrant status.

SECT: A cultivation sect is an organization of individuals united by their dedication to the practice of a particular method of cultivation or martial arts. A sect may have a signature style. Sects are led by a single leader, who is supported by senior sect members. They are not necessarily related by blood.

SEVEN APERTURES/QIQIAO: ( ) The seven facial apertures: the two eyes, nose, mouth, tongue, and two ears. The essential qi of vital organs are said to connect to the seven apertures, and illness in the vital organs may cause symptoms there. People who are ill or seriously injured may be “bleeding from the seven apertures.”

SHIDI, SHIXIONG, SHIZUN, ETC.: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person’s role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. *(See Name Guide for more information.)*

SPIRIT STONES: Small gems filled with qi that can be exchanged between cultivators as a form of currency. If so desired, the qi can be extracted for an extra energy boost.

STALLION NOVELS: A genre of fiction starring a male protagonist who has a harem full of women who fawn over him. Unlike many wish-fulfilment stories, the protagonist of a stallion novel is not the typical loser archetype and is more of an overpowered power fantasy. This genre is full of fanservice aimed at a heterosexual male audience, often focusing on the acquisition of a large harem over individual romantic plotlines with each wife.

The term itself is a comparison between the protagonist and a single male stud horse in a stable full of broodmares. *Proud Immortal Demon Way* is considered a prime example of a stallion novel.

SWORDS: A cultivator’s sword is an important part of their cultivation practice. In many instances, swords are spiritually bound to their owner and may have been bestowed to them by their master, a family member, or obtained through a ritual. Cultivators in fiction are able to use their swords as transportation by standing atop the flat of the blade and riding it as it flies through the air. Skilled cultivators can summon their swords to fly into their hand, command the sword to fight on its own, or release energy attacks from the edge of the blade.

SWORD GLARE: *Jianguang* (/ “sword light”), an energy attack released from a sword’s edge.

SWORN BROTHERS/SISTERS/FAMILIES: In China, sworn brotherhood describes a binding social pact made by two or more unrelated individuals of the same gender. It can be entered into for social, political, and/or personal reasons and is not only limited to two participants; it can extend to an entire group. It was most common among men but was not unheard of among women or between people of different genders.

The participants treat members of each other’s families as their own and assist them in the ways an extended family would: providing mutual support and aid, support in political alliances, etc.

Sworn siblinghood, where individuals will refer to themselves as brother or sister, is not to be confused with familial relations like blood siblings or adoption. It is sometimes used in Chinese media, particularly danmei, to imply romantic relationships that could otherwise be prone to censorship.

THE SYSTEM: A common trope in transmigration novels is the existence of a System that guides the character and provides them with objectives in exchange for benefits, often under the threat of consequences if they fail. The System may award points for completing objectives, which can then be exchanged for various items or boons. In *Scum Villain*, these are called B-points, originally named after the second sound in the phrase *zhuang bi* (/ “to act badass/to play it cool/to show off”).

THE THREE REALMS: Traditionally, the universe is divided into Three Realms: the **Heavenly Realm**, the **Mortal Realm**, and the **Ghost Realm**. The Heavenly Realm refers to the Heavens and Celestial Court, where gods reside and rule, the Mortal Realm refers to the human world, and the Ghost Realm refers to the realm of the dead. In *Scum Villain*, only the Mortal Realm is directly relevant, while the Demon Realm is a separate space where all demons and their ilk reside.

TSUNDERE: Anime fandom slang for a character who acts standoffish (tsun) but secretly has a loving side (dere), similar to “hot and cold” in English.

TRANSMIGRATION: (/ “to pass through”) is analogous to the isekai genre in Japanese media. A character, usually from the modern world, suddenly finds themself in the past, future, or a fantasy world, most often by reincarnation or teleportation. The character often uses knowledge from their former life to “cheat” in their new one, especially if they’ve transmigrated into a novel or game they have recently finished and thus have knowledge they can use to their advantage. These individuals are referred to as transmigrators.

VINEGAR: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means they’re having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

WEDDING TRADITIONS: Red is an important part of traditional Chinese weddings, as the color of prosperity, happiness, and good luck. It remains the standard color for bridal and bridegroom robes and wedding decorations even today.

A bride was always veiled when she was sent off by her family in her wedding dress. Veils were generally opaque, so the bride would need to be led around by her handmaidens (or the groom). The veil is not removed until the bride is in the wedding suite with the groom after the ceremony and is only removed by the groom himself. During the ceremony, the couple each cut off a lock of their own hair, then intertwine and tie the two locks together to symbolize their commitment.

WHUMP: Fandom slang for scenarios that result in a character enduring pain—emotional and/or physical—especially if the creator seems to have designed that scenario explicitly for that purpose.

WILLOW TREE: A symbol of lasting affection, friendship, and goodbyes. Also means “urging someone to stay,” and “meeting under the willows.” Can connote a rendezvous. Willows are synonymous with spring, which is considered the matchmaking season, and is thus synonymous with promiscuity. Willow imagery is also often used to describe lower-class women like singers and prostitutes.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between them can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

ZHONGDIAN LITERATURE: Likely intended as a parody of Qidian Chinese Net, a webnovel site known for hosting male-targeted novels. *(See Genres > Webnovels for more information.)*

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Footnotes

1. : A type of nature spirit in Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and other mythologies. They may be benevolent or capricious, and the dark kind are said to devour humans.

2. : A solitary, disconnected wall constructed to shield gates from evil spirits, as evil spirits in legend cannot turn corners.

3. Reference to a gadget in the popular children’s anime, Doraemon. The Anywhere Door opens a portal to wherever the user wishes.

4. A pun on Liu Qingge’s name, since “blood brother” in Chinese ( ) is a near homophone for Qingge ( ).

5. In Chinese, “drinking vinegar” is a euphemism for being jealous.

6. : This is a meme from the Chinese version of Mobile Suit Gundam, playing off the line “high-level energy reaction detected ahead." People often leave it as a bullet comment when something exciting is about to happen in a show or video.

7. : Also known as the Mahavira Hall, this is the main hall in a traditional Buddhist Temple.

8. : A character from the Chinese classic Water Margin. Known for his bad temper, pair of axes, incredible strength, and berserker-style of fighting.

9. : Like Jiu means “nine,” Qi similarly means “seven.”

10. : A common Chinese idiom approximately equivalent to “you read my mind” or “you know me like the back of your hand.”

11. : Xin Mo, the name of Luo Binghe’s sword itself.

12. : A traditional Chinese folk song with several variants, famous for its risqué nature, leading it to have been banned multiple times.

13. : Refers to the hardships and trials Tang Sanzang suffered on his pilgrimage to India in the Chinese classic Journey to the West.

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About the Author

“A young superstitious girl,
renowned poster of memes;
a gourmet world goof, who takes photos with shaky hands;
and types cursedly slow, finishing stories depending on the mood.
...All lies.

I actually enjoy a refreshing cup of tea in the afternoon, staring into the far-off distance as I open my beloved notebook to write poetry.
...No, no, no, that’s even more of a lie.

All right, actually, I'm just someone
who writes.

Yep.”

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX) is a globally renowned author whose works are often cited as the best-known in the modern danmei genre. Originally self-published via the novel serialization website, JJWXC, her current titles include *The Scum Villain’s Self-Saving System*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and *Heaven Official’s Blessing.* All three series have received multiple adaptations and have been published in numerous languages around the world.

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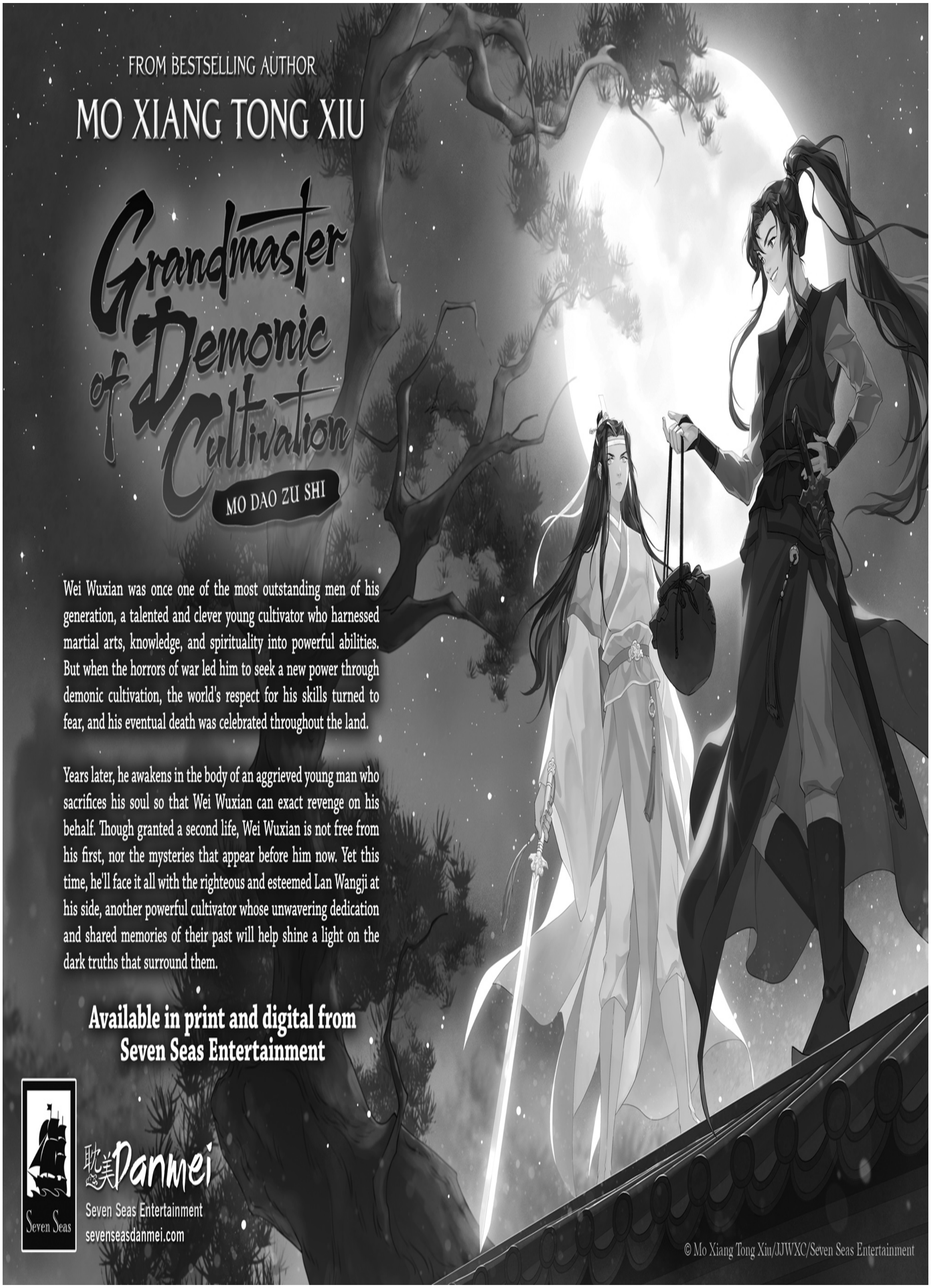

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MO XIANG TONG XIU

Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation

MO DAO ZU SHI

Wei Wuxian was once one of the most outstanding men of his generation, a talented and clever young cultivator who harnessed martial arts, knowledge, and spirituality into powerful abilities. But when the horrors of war led him to seek a new power through demonic cultivation, the world's respect for his skills turned to fear, and his eventual death was celebrated throughout the land.

Years later, he awakens in the body of an aggrieved young man who sacrifices his soul so that Wei Wuxian can exact revenge on his behalf. Though granted a second life, Wei Wuxian is not free from his first, nor the mysteries that appear before him now. Yet this time, he'll face it all with the righteous and esteemed Lan Wangji at his side, another powerful cultivator whose unwavering dedication and shared memories of their past will help shine a light on the dark truths that surround them.

Available in print and digital from Seven Seas Entertainment

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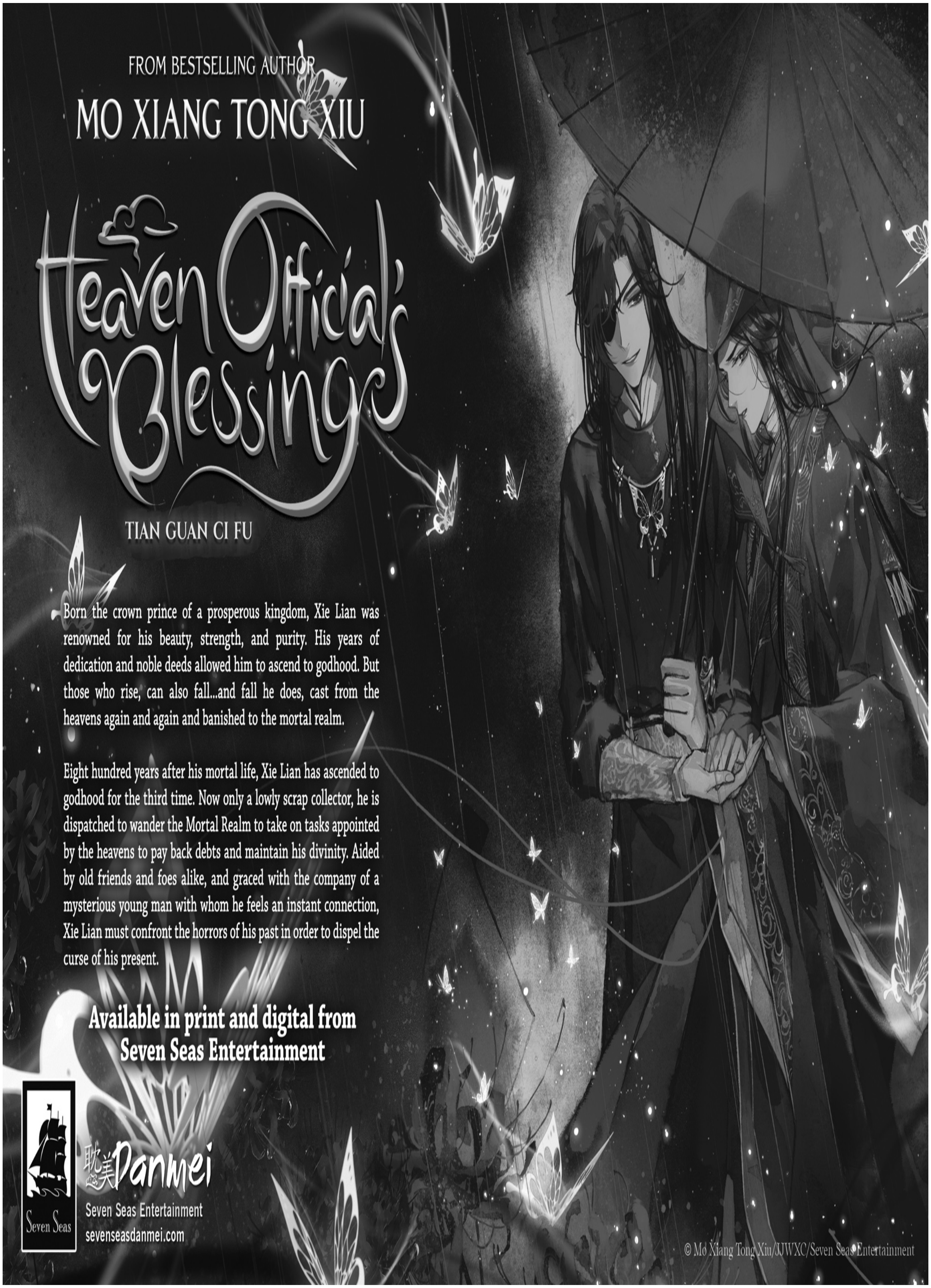

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MO XIANG TONG XIU

Heaven Official's Blessing

TIAN GUAN CI FU

Born the crown prince of a prosperous kingdom, Xie Lian was renowned for his beauty, strength, and purity. His years of dedication and noble deeds allowed him to ascend to godhood. But those who rise, can also fall...and fall he does, cast from the heavens again and again and banished to the mortal realm.

Eight hundred years after his mortal life, Xie Lian has ascended to godhood for the third time. Now only a lowly scrap collector, he is dispatched to wander the Mortal Realm to take on tasks appointed by the heavens to pay back debts and maintain his divinity. Aided by old friends and foes alike, and graced with the company of a mysterious young man with whom he feels an instant connection, Xie Lian must confront the horrors of his past in order to dispel the curse of his present.

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【 Satisfaction points +500! 】

To save his sect from destruction, Shen Qingqiu has at last submitted to Luo Binghe—though he wishes people would stop saying it that way! Unfortunately, they're not wrong.

Luo Binghe has finally made his desire for his old master clear. For all that Shen Qingqiu longs to return to their peaceful days together on Qing Jing Peak, he knows it's impossible now that Luo Binghe has darkened into a true demon lord. But as Shen Qingqiu begins to uncover more of *Proud Immortal Demon Way*'s hidden plot, including his host body's own backstory, he realizes he must learn to see Luo Binghe for who he truly is if either of them are to survive.

HEAVENLY DEMON
TIANLANG-JUN
DEMON GENERAL
ZHUZHI-LANG
HEAD DISCIPLE
SU XIYAN

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